



by Madam Ru

It's Not Easy to be a Man After Travelling to the Future



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– Crossing to the Future, it's Not Easy to Be a Man –

- Part 2 -

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Chapter 101

A Simple Test?

Ling Lan hadn't even waited for two minutes when the instructor said, "Ling Lan, it's your turn."

Under the instructor's guidance, Ling Lan touched the portal.

Her hand had barely touched the portal when she felt a tremendous sucking force pulling her entire body into it. Of course, this was just what Ling Lan felt. From an outsider's perspective, Ling Lan had only walked through the portal and disappeared.

"I hope this child can receive his inheritance!" This notion suddenly rose up within the young soldier's heart.

However, very soon he had received news from the secret monitors that that child had also been rejected and had been sent back to the login point.

Even such an exceptionally talented child had been denied? Ling Xiao, exactly what kind of inheritor were you looking for? It couldn't be denied that the young soldier was a little disappointed deep down, for he had really thought highly of that child. Perhaps there would be a chance in the future for him to help that child...

The staff who were monitoring in secret had tracked Ling Lan's movements in the virtual world from the very moment she entered the portal. Only when they saw her walk into the library from the login point, where she then proceeded to sit and study, looking as if she had no intention of moving, did the staff ease their monitoring.

The young soldier didn't know that these monitors, who were led by him in name, actually had another mission. The higher-ups had instructed that whenever a child named Ling Lan attempted the legacy mission, the child should be monitored closely every step of the way.

The moment Ling Lan entered the specialised space of the legacy mission, she actually found Little Four tucked away in a corner waiting for her. Surprised, she was just about to ask him what was going on when Little Four mysteriously pressed a finger against his lips and made a loud "Shhh!", signalling Ling Lan not to speak.

Ling Lan glared at Little Four irritably. If he was really trying to be stealthy, would he have made such a loud shushing noise? Still, Ling Lan didn't interrupt Little Four, merely waiting patiently for him to explain.

"Boss, someone is monitoring this space." Sure enough, Little Four gave her some momentous news.

"What exactly is going on?" asked Ling Lan in confusion.

"This space is not yet the real legacy mission space. It is just a transit station that the virtual world has specially set aside for this legacy mission, which is why it can be monitored," explained Little Four. "I've tracked it, and it's connected to the military."

Ling Lan frowned, "And you still dare to stay here?" Wouldn't the other side discover Little Four and cause them trouble?

Little Four rolled his eyes at Ling Lan, extremely displeased that she didn't trust him. "Who am I? I am the god of the virtual world. They can only see what I want them to see. Like right now, all they can see is an image of you standing in front of that diamond-shaped crystal, investigating it seriously." Little Four was very smug about this.

"Now who was it who acted as if a great enemy was upon us, telling me to not make a sound?" Ling Lan glared coolly at Little Four, instantly smothering his budding self-satisfaction.

Sensing that things were veering off-track, Little Four immediately adopted an obedient look, eager to please. This made Ling Lan annoyed and amused in equal measure; in the end, Ling Lan could only let it go, turning to focus on a more important question.

"About this legacy mission, how much do you know?" Since Little Four had come so early, he should have already gotten some understanding of the situation.

But reality wasn't as simple as Ling Lan had assumed. When Little Four heard this question, his entire face fell. With a greatly stricken look, he said dejectedly, "Sorry, Boss, I can't get into that place." Little Four pointed to the front where the diamond-shaped crystal was hovering in the air, slowly turning on its axis.

"What is it? A portal?" Ling Lan walked over to the crystal to peer at it curiously.

Little Four said gloomily, "It is also a type of portal, but this crystal is some strong person's solidified spiritual essence. I believe that the test space is right inside. Originally, I wanted to go inside to find out more, but I had just gotten close when I was repelled by the spiritual force around the crystal. It almost injured me," said Little Four as he patted his little chest in remembered fear. If he had gotten hurt, his mental faculties would have been disrupted, and it might have been a very long time before he could have appeared in front of Ling Lan again.

"Oh? Then what should I do?" Hearing Little Four's words, Ling Lan became more cautious.

"You just need to touch that crystal. That's what I saw many of the students do," said Little Four. "After they touched the crystal, they disappeared from this virtual world, and then one or two minutes later, they reappeared in the virtual world again, but they were already back at the login point where we first logged in."

"Disappeared from the virtual world? Could it be a new space?" Ling Lan understood what Little Four was saying. In other words, they hadn't been transported to another area in the virtual world, but had disappeared directly from this virtual world itself.

Little Four thought for a moment before saying, "I have some incomplete data here — it seems that there is a theory that when a person's strength reaches a certain level, a realm will emerge. And every individual's realm is an independent space."

Hearing this, Ling Lan couldn't help but think of Dao. The essence of Dao can weaken an opponent's abilities — was it then also a type of realm, except that this realm was not yet complete?

The notion came and went, and Ling Lan moved on to her next question, "Did all those students fail the mission?"

"Of course! Otherwise the next person wouldn't be able to enter. This legacy mission is really very interesting, only allowing one person to enter at a time. Only when the

person inside has failed can the next person go in. Luckily the testing time is quick — the results are typically out within two or three minutes. There was even one student who didn't even manage to last 30 seconds before being sent to the login point. How stupid," said Little Four with clear schadenfreude.

"Perhaps I won't do much better," said Ling Lan disapprovingly. Who knew what things would be tested inside — no one could guarantee that they would definitely be able to pass.

"Boss will surely do fine and take down this legacy mission." said Little Four with a pout. In his mind, Ling Lan was the smartest!

"Little Four, thank you." Ling Lan was very touched by Little Four's faith in her. She stroked Little Four's small head, while her mind was working through her next options.

With some doubt, Ling Lan said, "Little Four, I want to give up on this mission. You know why... I don't want the military to notice me." It would be fine if she didn't manage to complete it, but if by chance she really managed to complete it, it might result in some negative repercussions for her.

Puzzled, Little Four said, "Even so, you don't have to give up, right? I can create an illusion, so no matter whether Boss succeeds or fails, I can make it look like you're chased out after 3 minutes."

"Little Four, you can create illusions?" Ling Lan was extremely surprised. But then, she recalled that Little Four could alter human brainwaves, so of course he could also mimic human brainwaves to make an illusory Ling Lan appear in the virtual world.

"However, if I stay inside, it will still be useless when the next person finds that they can't get in," said Ling Lan with a sigh.

"That's easy. I'll just make a new space and let the children after that enter that new space. And then, I'll set it so that they'll be sent back to the login point at a random time between one to three minutes." Little Four didn't see the problem.

"And what about the contents of the test?" After all, quite a few students had already entered the real legacy mission space to take the real test. If by any chance it was discovered that the test contents were different, it would be bad.

"Tch, Boss, you really have too many questions. Wouldn't you already be inside the real test by then? As long as you're inside, when you take the test, I'll be able to find out the test contents then. At that time, I'll just copy it over... Also, if by any chance Boss fails and gets thrown out, I won't even have to make a new space anymore. So, Boss, just go in and leave everything to Little Four."

Little Four couldn't stand it any longer and nudged Ling Lan impatiently to go in. Although Little Four could give those monitors an illusion, he couldn't just let Ling Lan continue to just stand still in front of the crystal — that would be suspicious.

Ling Lan finally relaxed. She put her hand onto the crystal floating in the air — for some reason, when she touched the crystal, she felt an indescribable sense of kinship, warming her deeply from the inside...

Then, she was enveloped by the warmth of this spiritual energy and was brought to a place shrouded in fog. There was nothing at all in her surroundings other than semi-transparent fog and mist.

Just as Ling Lan was wondering what she should do, the mist suddenly condensed to form a grey figure. This figure was short and small, roughly the height and size of the present Ling Lan. And then, the little figure started to go through a set of combat arts.

Ling Lan took a close look and found herself speechless. Was this the test? Wasn't this just a little too easy? It turned out that that little figure was going through one of the basic combat arts that all students learned from the academy in grade one.

"Scout basics combat arts?" Ling Lan tentatively gave her answer, but found that the little figure was still going through the motions without stopping.

So it wasn't testing her for the name of the art? A thought flashed through Ling Lan's mind, and she struck a pose and begun following the grey figure to go through this set of basic combat arts. However, Ling Lan started from the very first stance; she wanted to prove her hypothesis.

Sure enough, Ling Lan found that the moment she started, that little figure restarted to follow Ling Lan as she went through the movements. As she had guessed, it was indeed a test of body language. Of course, it wasn't impossible for it to also be a test of combat art names, so Ling Lan decided to cover all her bases to make sure that she would pass safely.

Ling Lan called out the name of each move as she performed them, until she and the grey figure were moving completely in sync. When Ling Lan finally finished going through the entire set of combat arts, the grey figure disappeared, leaving Ling Lan standing alone in the space once again. She hadn't been thrown out, so it looked like she had passed this first round of testing.

Ling Lan let out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness she had guessed correctly. That one set of combat arts had taken up roughly two to three minutes... which meant that most students had failed in the second round. What in the world was this second round testing for which would cause all of the students to fail?

Ling Lan's heartbeat became a little erratic just thinking about it. At this moment, the mist once again condensed into a human figure, but the figure this time was no longer a small child, but a bulky adult. This figure proceeded to go through yet another set of combat arts, but this particular set made Ling Lan's facial expression change drastically.

Chapter 102

A Test of Questions and Answers!

Ling-style killing arts! That was one of the Ling family loyalists' specialised combat arts — why would it appear here in this mission space? Doubt rose in Ling Lan's heart. If it could be said that she wasn't particularly concerned about this legacy mission at the start, now that she had seen this set of killing arts, Ling Lan had no choice but to take it seriously.

Ling Lan did not hesitate — she quickly followed the figure's lead to go through every punch and kick of the Ling-style killing arts perfectly. Having grown up practising these arts in combat training with the Ling family loyalists, Ling Lan had long had it ingrained in her memory.

Once Ling Lan had gone through the full set of the killing arts perfectly, the grey figure dissipated once again. At the same time, Ling Lan felt as if the surrounding fog and mist were gradually melting away, and soon, she could clearly see the scenery before her.

She was standing on a lush and green lawn. In the distance, there were the highs and lows of mountain ranges, circled by clouds and mist; nearby, a stream was trickling, and the air was filled with birdsong and the scent of flowers. A lovely and tranquil mountain valley scene had just appeared so abruptly before Ling Lan's eyes.

Ling Lan had never seen scenery as beautiful as this, which caused her heart to become unbelievably quiet in an instant. At that moment, a sheet of white paper suddenly descended from the skies, drifting down leisurely to float miraculously at her eye level and unfurled itself.

On it was a line of writing. It was a request: *This is a beautiful mountain valley, but unfortunately, till now it still has no name. Please give it a nice name now.*

Ling Lan had just finished scanning these words when an exquisite Chinese writing brush appeared beside the white paper.

That's strange. Why would such an ancient thing appear in this modern place?

Ling Lan's brows furrowed. Her gaze was fixed on the writing brush — the more she looked at it, the stranger it seemed. This was because the design of the brush actually seemed somewhat familiar to her, but she just couldn't recall where she had seen it before.

The academy? Ling Lan silently shook her head, eliminating this possibility. The academy was too advanced — if you told her that there were some things that defied reality there, Ling Lan might still believe you, but for an almost extinct antique such as a Chinese writing brush to appear there was almost impossible.

In that case, the only possibility was her house.

When and where would she have seen a writing brush like this one in her house? A writing brush would typically appear in a study room, but the study in the old Ling family mansion belonged to her father. Thus, the writing brushes in there were all bold and simple in design — there was no such elegantly exquisite writing brush there, which was clearly meant for women...

For women? The study? Ling Lan suddenly recalled an incident... That was back when she had first started learning how to read and write. She had been dragged into the study by her mum to practise calligraphy. Her mum had said that this was a Ling family tradition — every descendant of the Ling family must learn how to do it well. Back then, Ling Lan had been miserable. Her tiny fingers hadn't been able to hold any of her father's large writing brushes in the proper grip. In the end, she could only pretend to be clueless and innocent, and just grip the writing brush as if it were a mop.

Seeing Ling Lan's put-out expression, Lan Luofeng had been giggling with amusement. However, she also knew then that she had been careless, not having prepared a small writing brush more appropriate for Ling Lan. In the end, in order to let Ling Lan grip the brush correctly, she had taken out a small writing brush that she treasured dearly, lending it to Ling Lan. She had also told Ling Lan with a tender look that this was a love token given to her by her father Ling Xiao.

She remembered that she had reflexively complained right then that her dad was really such a cheapskate, while her mum was just too gullible. Lan Luofeng hadn't known whether to laugh or cry, and had knocked her smartly on the head. Still, that little writing brush had really been so pretty and exquisite that Ling Lan had played with it curiously for a good long while that day. But starting from the second day, that delicate little writing brush had once again been secreted away by Lan Luofeng. In its

place was an extremely common small writing brush. From then on, Ling Lan had never again seen that love-token writing brush.

Five years had passed since then, and Ling Lan had almost entirely forgotten that event as well as that brush.

Ling Lan suppressed the emotions roiling within her. Carefully, she picked up the exquisite writing brush before her and twirled it in her palms. A phoenix with its wings outstretched in flight was carved on the shaft of the brush. It was exactly like the one she had seen in the past — sure enough, this brush was the one from her memory.

Could it be that this legacy had something to do with the Ling family? Something to do with her dad? Or perhaps this legacy *was* from her dad?

Ling Lan felt as if she were going mad, otherwise why would she even have these kinds of thoughts? Legacy missions could only be issued by someone at the level of a imperial operator or beyond. And anyone at that level would undoubtedly be a terrifying existence, almost a symbol of immortality. How could that short-lived dad of hers fall into this category?

But what if it were true? Ling Lan's heart started pounding violently...

Right then, another line of writing suddenly appeared on the paper: *You still have one minute to think. The countdown begins now. 60, 59, 58...*

F*ck! Ling Lan's emotional feelings fled instantly. She started thinking hard on what name she should give to this valley. At this moment, Ling Lan was somewhat regretful that she had gotten distracted by the writing brush, and had not used her time wisely to think about this problem.

"A beautiful valley, an exquisite brush? What exactly is this legacy mission trying to tell me with this imagery?" The CPU of Ling Lan's little brain was whirring at full speed, trying to find any hint she could from her surroundings.

The writing brush was her mum's love-token? In that case, could this lovely valley also have something to do with her mum? Ling Lan began scouring through the conversations she had had with her mum, hoping that she would be able to find some clue there.

43, 42, 41... time continued to slip away bit by bit. Ling Lan's forehead began to bead up with sweat — Goddammit, if only Little Four were here.

"*Boss, looking for me?*" Little Four's voice suddenly rang out from within her consciousness. Ling Lan was startled, "*Little Four, you're here?*"

"*Yup, I've been watching all this time. It's just that I was sealed by an energy force and couldn't talk to you. But when you thought of me just now, that energy just disappeared,*" replied Little Four.

"*Enough about that for now. There's still about 30 seconds left. Quick, help me think, when I talked with my mum before this, did she ever mention a place like this?*" Ling Lan was burning with anxiety, throwing out the question hurriedly.

"*That's a bit too broad. Are there any more hints?*" Little Four also became anxious, and his core processing chip started running in overdrive.

"*Whatever location for my parents' engagement, dating, or proposal, or perhaps a marriage spot or a honeymoon destination... or maybe some country that she has a deep impression of, or even an ideal country to build a home?*" Ling Lan ran through anything she could think of — all she could do now was gamble.

"*Dating spots... other than the Ling estates, it was military camps. Your dad is really unromantic!*" muttered Little Four. How in the world had Mama Lan been wooed by this? "*Engagement? Proposal? Marriage? Honeymoon? Huh?! The family estates? Military camps? Hells, did your dad only know how to run between the family grounds and the military camps?! Did he never even consider exploring other places?!*"

Little Four was infuriated. No matter how hard he looked, Ling Xiao and Lan Luofeng's romance history only went back and forth between military camps and the old Ling family estates. There was nothing at all connected with this beautiful valley before them right now.

"*Then what about dreams? Or ideals? Didn't my mum have any places which she really wanted to visit?*" Ling Lan saw the number on the paper dropping from double digits into single digits, and couldn't help but yell.

"*I've got it! It's Belief! Mama Lan most wanted to go to Belief...*" Little Four finally located the place that Lan Luofeng missed the most.

At this point, the countdown had already reached 3. Ling Lan didn't hesitate, quickly writing down 'Belief'. The moment the final 'f' was written, the countdown timer hit zero.

Ling Lan stared blankly at her answer. She honestly had no idea what kind of place 'Belief' was, so she didn't know if this answer that Little Four provided was right or not. Whatever the result, she had already tried her best.

The words on the paper slowly faded away, including Ling Lan's answer, and the paper turned back into a completely white sheet. Ling Lan took in a deep breath and waited for the final determination of the legacy mission.

You Pass! Two words in bold and vigorous cursive writing emerged on the paper. When Ling Lan saw the two words, the tension in her heart eased, and she soon started to feel fatigue settling into her body and mind. The intense pressure and anxiety within that short one minute had really taken a toll on her mental resources.

When the two words disappeared once more, new questions appeared. However, these questions were not at all difficult, because they were clearly a type of self-introduction.

"Name: Ling Lan!"

"Father: Ling Xiao!"

"Mother: Lan Luofeng!"

"Age: 7 years!"

"What does your father like best?" The fifth question made Ling Lan pause. She stopped the brush in her hand, thinking back on what Lan Luofeng had said.

"Baby Ling Lan, do you know what your father likes?" Lan Luofeng was hugging Ling Lan, showing her a photo of her and Ling Xiao together, as she asked Ling Lan this.

Ling Lan rolled her eyes mentally. If her mum didn't tell her, how would she know?

"Your father really, really likes mecha. You could even say that, in his life, besides

mecha, there is still only mecha. Mummy was sometimes jealous of his mecha, but your daddy was the coolest when he was piloting his mecha. No one else could compare." Mama Lan was starting to get lost in her fantasies again, her face dreamy with recollection. This made the one-year-old baby Ling Lan whack Ling Xiao's charming smiling face in the photo with a small hand.

"*You menace!*" scolded Ling Lan internally. The moment her dad was brought up, her mum would become unsteady.

"Still, what your dad loved most was me. Did you know that? Your daddy told me once... if he had to choose between me and mecha, he would abandon mecha without question, and choose me." At this point in her story, Lan Luofeng blushed. "Wait till I meet him again. I will definitely make him throw away his mecha, and accompany me forever... like he promised."

Ling Lan felt a faint sense of melancholy from these words. Loving so deeply that she just could not accept the other's death... whenever Lan Luofeng mentioned Ling Xiao, she spoke of him as if he were just on a long journey away, as if he hadn't truly departed.

Wasn't mum the one dad loved the most? This was probably also what her mum wished for... Ling Lan sighed, and behind the question of '*what does your father like best*', she wrote down 'Lan Luofeng'.

However, the next question gave Ling Lan yet another headache — why were the questions of this legacy mission so bizarre?

"*Your mother's sleeping habit?*" Ling Lan's face couldn't help but twitch at this question. Without hesitation, she put down 'grinding her teeth'.

When Ling Lan stopped writing, a final question appeared on the paper. "*Do you need to modify your answers?*"

Ling Lan resolutely wrote 'no'. At the final stroke, the brush in Ling Lan's hand instantly turned into black mist and dissipated into the air. The words on the paper also disappeared once again.

And then, very quickly, a new line of writing emerged on the paper.

"Congratulations on advancing to the next round!"

Chapter 103

A Heartless Dad?

At the appearance of this line of text, the beautiful valley before Ling Lan's eyes shattered like glass and dissipated. In the blink of an eye, a new scene unfolded before Ling Lan's eyes. She was now in some luxurious hall, a hall which Ling Lan could not be more familiar with. It was the hall of the home she had lived in for a full 7 years — the Ling family mansion.

Ling Lan's gaze revealed a trace of surprise at this unexpected scene. The cautious Ling Lan did not choose to walk around randomly, but instead stood still where she was. She tapped lightly on her own head as she thought: *Was this originally set up this way? Or had the legacy mission extracted this image from her memories to create an impromptu illusion?*

She needed to figure this out, otherwise she might make a wrong choice in the upcoming round of tests and fail the mission. Although she had already gone further than any of the other children before her, Ling Lan was still unwilling to accept failure down to her very bones.

Ling Lan decided that she would first investigate the details of this great hall. If this scenery was the original setting of the legacy mission, then it was very likely related to her father Ling Xiao. If that was the case, this mansion drawn from Ling Xiao's memories would most definitely have some differences in comparison to the current mansion. Her father had already been dead for almost 8 years after all. On the other hand, if this illusion was born from an extraction of her memories, then she shouldn't be able to find any differences in her surroundings.

Ling Lan took a careful look around, and very soon, she had found something different. There was an additional woollen army coat on one of the armchairs in the hall, and on the wall behind it, the space beside her parents' wedding photo was empty. It was missing a portrait of herself.

Every year, Lan Luofeng would choose one of Ling Lan's newest photos to convert into a portrait, and then hang it beside their wedding photo in the great hall. The portrait had already been changed seven times without skipping a year. According to Lan

Luofeng, she wanted Ling Xiao to keep watching Ling Lan as she grew up.

But in Ling Lan's opinion, Lan Luofeng was clearly just too free and needed to find something to do. Still, to keep her mother happy, Ling Lan was glad to oblige.

"From this, it looks like this scene is definitely not drawn from my memory. From the time I was born, my picture has always been hung here." Ling Lan's lips quirked up in a small smile. Since she had gotten her answer, her following choices would be much easier.

When Ling Lan took her first step, a clear and resounding voice rang out in the hall. "Please choose a room as you wish. The test content of every room is different. Some are easy, while some are difficult..."

The corner of Ling Lan's lips quirked upwards. This was probably a trap. Ever since she had entered this legacy mission, she had not seen any task that depended purely on luck. This was obviously abnormal if it really was as she thought.

As if sensing Ling Lan's thoughts, the clear voice continued to say, "This has nothing to do with being fair. Sometimes, luck is also a type of strength." Of course, it didn't change the fact that, whether you liked it or not, this was how it would be.

The clear voice had barely faded when the doors of all the rooms facing the hall swung open in unison with crisp sounds. The opened doorways seemed to beckon Ling Lan to enter.

"Isn't this just a misleading trick?" Ling Lan already had an answer in her heart. If this were someone who didn't know the Ling family mansion, they would definitely be tricked by this scene before them. This mission had been silently eliminating all candidates who weren't from the Ling family from the very beginning. This was probably why all the children before her hadn't been able to pass — they were all not Ling Lan.

"Were you waiting for me? Oh, Father!" By this point, Ling Lan could pretty much confirm that this legacy mission had been created by her father Ling Xiao.

Oh dad, what kind of person are you, really? Ling Lan smiled wryly. She really regretted not having looked up information on Ling Xiao, causing her to be floundering in confusion right now.

Ling Lan settled her emotions and then began walking determinedly across the hall. She ignored the stairways curling off to the sides, walking directly to the centre of the corridor.

There were rooms along both sides of the corridor. Right now, all the room doors were already open. As Ling Lan walked down the hallway, she could see the decorations and contents of the rooms. Some of them were the same as their current counterparts, while others were completely different. Was this how it was in her father's memory?

She walked over to stand before a full-length mirror. The mirror was very tall and large, reaching up to 2.5 metres tall and spanning 4 metres wide.

Without any hesitation, Ling Lan pushed her palms against the mirror and something unexpected occurred. The mirror actually broke apart from the middle, folding in on itself in four different directions until it finally disappeared to reveal a hidden passage. At the end of the 4-metre wide passage was a spacious staircase draped with a shaggy white carpet.

Ling Lan had just stepped into the passage when the mirror reassembled itself behind her, returning to its original appearance in the blink of an eye. It was once more a flawless full-length mirror, its fine cracks imperceptible to the naked eye. Modern-day technology was already able to achieve this flawless perfection.

The Ling family mansion was split into two independent areas. The front section was for entertaining guests, though it naturally included a master bedroom for the master, along with studies and other common rooms to fend off spying.

Meanwhile, the hidden back area was where the Ling family head truly resided. Besides the Ling family head, this secret was only known to a few old loyal servants who frequently visited the mansion.

Therefore, even if other students had passed the previous few rounds by chance, once they got here, they would still be unable to find the correct room. Furthermore, even if someone accidentally touched the mirror, it still wouldn't open. This was because the force necessary to open the mirror corresponded to the position touched. If the position touched was different, the force needed to trigger the mirror to open would also be different.

Of course, this did not exclude the possibility of someone being phenomenally lucky,

being able to pass every round of the test by sheer luck... This sort of person would obviously be someone favoured by the heavens, a destined winner in life, the main character of a story — Ling Lan would have no regrets losing the legacy to such a person; it was stupid to try and match an abnormality.

Ling Lan slowly walked up the staircase. For some reason, her heart started pounding dramatically and her palms started oozing sweat. Would Ling Xiao, her father in this life, really appear in that room?

Ling Lan finally arrived at the study. Her mum Lan Luofeng had once said that this study belonged to Ling Xiao. Flipped around, it meant that Ling Xiao also only existed within that study room. The moment Ling Xiao walked out of that study, Ling Xiao was no longer Ling Xiao, but Lan Luofeng's hubby.

Ling Lan had always felt that her mum was rather domineering — she just hid it very deeply. In particular, her soft-touch methods were on a level of its own; tears especially, were one of her sure-win tactics. Many times Ling Lan had surrendered to these methods, and she believed that her father would also have been powerless against them.

Thus, Ling Lan chose the study. Since this was a legacy mission set by Ling Xiao, then he would only be able to pass on the legacy when he was truly Ling Xiao.

Ling Lan took a deep breath and placed her right hand on the door handle of the room. With a strong push, the door easily swung open, and everything within the study was revealed before her eyes.

Abruptly, silent tears fell from Ling Lan's eyes...

Behind the study desk, a handsome young man was smiling gently as he looked at her. And that man was her father, Ling Xiao.

Only then did Ling Lan notice that, over the span of these 7 years, under Lan Luofeng's daily nagging and bombardment of stories, she had already subconsciously accepted this man before her as her father. It was only because Ling Xiao wasn't physically around that these affectionate emotions had been deeply buried within Ling Lan's heart, and had never been discovered by herself. And now, really seeing her father standing before her, Ling Lan could no longer control the emotions in her heart. The tears could not be stopped as she involuntarily began to cry.

The current Ling Xiao should be a memory-entity from 8 years ago. He was utterly unmoved by Ling Lan's emotional turmoil, only giving her a slight nod before saying, "Being able to get here, you should be my child Ling Lan."

However, he quickly scoffed at himself and said, "Well, not definitely. I believe that the military will not let go of this legacy so easily. Perhaps you all really managed to crack this mission. After all, the previous rounds and questions weren't that difficult." With these words, a cold glint suddenly flashed across Ling Xiao's eyes. Ling Lan abruptly felt a crushing wave of pressure sweep towards her, almost flattening her to the ground. Fortunately, Ling Lan had already been fashioned by the learning space into a little anomaly — she immediately leaked a little essence of Dao to bear the burden of this endless pressure.

Still, just this small taste had told Ling Lan that her father was, as expected, very strong. Anyone who could issue a legacy mission was no ordinary person.

It seemed that Ling Xiao only wanted to posture a little, and he may also be wary in case the one who passed was really his child. Very quickly, he had retracted the pressure emanating from his body.

"If the one inheriting my legacy is not my child, I have only one wish. After you have learnt it, look for my child, and pass these things on to him." Ling Xiao's words made Ling Lan's tears fall even more fiercely; this legacy had really been left for her by her father.

Ling Xiao's attitude gentled abruptly, and he said, "If you want to receive my legacy, there is one more mission you must complete. Find me something I need."

With those words, Ling Xiao said nothing further, only looking straight at Ling Lan with a smile. Ling Lan hurriedly wiped away her tears. This wasn't the time for her to mope and be melancholy; she had to finish this mission first.

Ling Lan asked carefully, "Could you give a little more detail?"

All that answered Ling Lan was still just Ling Xiao's smile. Ling Lan tried a few other things, beating around the bush, but unfortunately, Ling Xiao just smiled at everything. Ling Lan was rather put out by this, a little resentful that her dad had made this legacy mission so complicated.

With no other choice, Ling Lan could only observe the study room closely in hopes

that she would be able to locate some kind of clue. Sadly, Ling Lan was quickly disappointed. She noticed that this study was almost identical to the study in her memory. Other than Ling Xiao sitting behind the desk, all the decorations and furniture in the room were exactly the same. It was clear to see how much Lan Luofeng had treasured Ling Xiao's study, unwilling to change any bit of it after his death.

Ling Lan was frustrated. What should she do? What thing could her old dad need? Ling Lan could only take a closer look at Ling Xiao, and hope that she would be able to discern something from his facial expressions and body language.

At that moment, Ling Xiao looked as if he were enjoying the show. His jaw was cradled in his left hand, which was leaning artlessly against the arm of the chair. His right hand was tapping lightly on the surface of the desk as he looked at her with a half-smile.

Dammit, this heartless old man of hers, actually tormenting his own child so... Ling Lan was full of complaints.

Although Ling Lan understood deep down that the Ling Xiao before her now was the Ling Xiao of 8 years ago who knew nothing of the person standing before him now, and that this sort of irritating attitude was definitely not targeted at her specifically... she just couldn't help but feel annoyed.

Chapter 104

The World of Belief!

Also, why did he have to keep tapping his fingers? Didn't he know that all that noise would interfere with her thinking process?

Wait... tapping noises? Ling Lan suddenly recalled something Lan Luofeng had mentioned before. When her mum had first met her dad, she had been attracted by the noise her dad had made by tapping on a table. It was because of that that they had gotten to know each other, and their love story had taken off and became unstoppable...

Back then, her mum had been a fresh-faced 16 year old maiden who had just graduated from a scout academy. As she hadn't been particularly talented and didn't have good potential, she hadn't managed to get into any of the major military schools of the Federation. However, Lan Luofeng had dreamed of being in the military since young, so she had decisively signed up to serve as a foot soldier, finally succeeding in becoming a common starship JMC¹ female trooper.

After 3 months of training for new recruits, her mum had been assigned to the starship fleet belonging to her dad, finally becoming the second mainship's JMC.

Subsequently, whenever Lan Luofeng had gone out to eat with the other female troopers of the same rank, she would find that no matter where they sat, some mecha fighters would appear by their side. Among them was a young man, who seemed to be their team leader. He appeared especially handsome and powerful, drawing the admiration of many of the female troopers.

However, the sense of hierarchy within the military camps was very strong. Even the most average mecha fighter held the military rank of second lieutenant, not to mention one at captain level. Meanwhile, they were merely some common female troopers of the lowest possible rank. They just didn't have the right to initiate conversation with a mecha fighter. They could only fantasize every day that these mecha fighters would one day greet them first... Many girls had been willing to

become soldiers, largely for the purpose of reeling in a rich and promising husband.

Lan Luofeng was the only girl who didn't think anything of this. She was still very young and hadn't become interested in love yet, which was why she was rather slow when it came to these things. However, even so, Lan Luofeng had also been surprised sometimes, wondering why she would run into that mecha officer so often — no matter where she sat, she would bump into him.

Back when she had first heard the story, Ling Lan had known right away that it was because her dad had already started crushing on her mum. That's why he was using this sort of 'serendipitous meeting' method to increase her mum's impression of him... he had really been quite desperate.

Just like that, a month had passed by in fits and starts. Then one day, Lan Luofeng had 'unfortunately' ended up alone. The other JMCs in her class had been sent out to carry out various competition missions for the various divisions of the Federation, because the mecha fighter confrontation event had been drawn by the second mainship. Consequently, the second mainship had sent out the main force of their mecha battle squad, and the JMCs in charge of those mecha had to go with them. In the end, only three JMCs were left on the second mainship. Every class of JMCs had had to leave a member behind on duty; Lan Luofeng's class had left the youngest member of their class, Lan Luofeng, behind.

And so when it was time to eat, Lan Luofeng could only go eat by herself. Just as she had sat down to begin her meal, someone suddenly sat down across from her. It was that young and handsome mecha officer who kept bumping into her whom she still didn't know.

Lan Luofeng found it strange that the other would choose to sit at her dining table when there were so many other empty seats and tables around. However, they were in a public canteen — anyone could freely choose where they wanted to sit. Despite the strangeness, Lan Luofeng didn't think too much about it and just continued to eat her food.

Naturally, Ling Xiao, who had worked so hard to create this opportunity, was unwilling to retreat without attempting anything. Let it be known that for the sake of getting some time alone with Lan Luofeng, he had cracked his head to squeeze out every ounce of ingenuity he had. He had purposely volunteered his unit for the mecha confrontation event mission, just so he could send away all those annoying JMCs

hanging around.

Yet, he had never gotten to know a girl before, so he was at a loss on what to do next. In the end, he had clumsily chosen to attract Lan Luofeng's attention by making noise.

So, Ling Xiao had used his fingers to knock on the surface of the table lightly. Three long two short. Pause. Followed by another three long two short. Just like that, he started tapping out a consistent rhythm. At first, Lan Luofeng had found it strange, and then her attention had been captured, curious. When she saw that no one else was looking, she quietly asked Ling Xiao what he was doing with this rhythmic tapping.

Smiling, Ling Xiao told Lan Luofeng all the information he had prepared beforehand. Apparently, this kind of knocking was a type of code, called the Duomo code. It was a type of secret code shared between a JMC and the mecha fighter they were responsible for. Back during the warring period, there had been an incident where the communications channel connecting a JMC and their mecha had been hacked and deciphered... in the end, the enemy had used the information gained from this hacking to set up an ambush, resulting in the complete destruction of an entire mecha troop. Later, a JMC named Duomo had thought up this method of communication. Using the code he thought up, he had helped his mecha fighter to escape the enemy's ambush again and again, completing their missions successfully to return safely.

From then onwards, every JMC would create their own unique Duomo code, to prevent a similar situation from happening ever again.

As a JMC, Lan Luofeng was naturally very interested in this sort of code. She sincerely requested to learn more about this code, but Ling Xiao seemed rather reluctant to say more. However, under Lan Luofeng's repeated pleading, he finally agreed, making Lan Luofeng feel extremely grateful.

Listening to the story up till this point, Ling Lan could only sigh at her mum's naïveté. Her dad had obviously been putting on an act to reel her mum in. Still, her mum couldn't be blamed for getting hooked so easily — her dad had clearly grasped her mum's vital point. Any dutiful JMC with ambition would not be able to resist this temptation. All she could say was that her old man had just been too shameless.

Whenever Lan Luofeng told the story, at this point, she would hold her face in her hands and sigh dreamily. She would marvel at the fact that Ling Lan's dad and her were just so meant to be — because, in their following conversations, she had found out

that Ling Xiao was also a mecha fighter of the second mainship, and on top of that, he was one of the mecha fighters she was responsible for. But Ling Xiao later told her that he had known she was the one from the very beginning. Her voice had been different from anyone else's — soft and sweet, so very comfortable to listen to. His heart had imprinted on it from the very moment he had first heard her speak.

When Lan Luofeng told Ling Lan this, Ling Lan couldn't help but stifle a grin. She just knew that her dad had harboured impure intentions, and it looked like he had a voice kink as well.

After spending time alone together, just the two of them, for about half a month, the temperature of their feelings rose quickly. The two of them then agreed to become an exclusive JMC and mecha fighter pair, and together they created a Duomo code that belonged only to them.

Of course, this Duomo code hadn't yet found its way to the battlefield when, after the other JMCs returned, it had begun to be used frequently by them in daily life. Because they were afraid the other JMCs would find out about the two of them (it was primarily Lan Luofeng who was shy — who asked her to be the youngest and yet be the first one to get a boyfriend?), so every time they wanted to date, Ling Xiao would sit at the table beside Lan Luofeng's during meal times and rap on the table with his fingers. In their code, he would tell her where and when to meet, and regardless of whether Lan Luofeng was free, she would always rap back in their code to tell Ling Xiao if she would meet him or not.

At this point of the story, Ling Lan was really speechless. Could this still be considered dating? Why did it seem more like undercover spies trying to meet up? Still, Ling Lan was glad for her mum. Her first love had been so perfect that she had directly gotten married to her dad. It was just unfortunate that her dad had died young... this should be blamed on this current world, full of war and strife, no peace in sight.

In order to make her mum happy, Ling Lan had expressed great interest in their Duomo code and said that she wanted to learn it. Hearing this, Lan Luofeng had been overjoyed, and had passed everything about this Duomo code belonging to her and Ling Xiao on to Ling Lan.

Thinking back on this, Ling Lan began listening closely to Ling Xiao's tapping sounds.

One long two short, three long one short, two long one short, four continuous short taps... Ling Xiao's tapping was very systematic. Four distinctly different sound sections, representing four syllables — posepro kento? kento posepro? token propose? It was 'proposal token' ²!

Ugh. Dad, how much did you love mum, really? Ling Lan thought back on all the tests she had gone through thus far; they all had something to do with her mother to some extent.

Frankly, Ling Lan was wrongly blaming Ling Xiao. Even before Ling Xiao had left for the death tunnel, he had had a premonition that something would go wrong. However, a military order was absolute — he couldn't not go. So, before he had left, he had condensed his spirit energy to create this legacy mission, in hopes that his child would be able to obtain his legacy.

Still, he knew very well that the upper ranks of the military were greedy for the way he had managed to advance to legendary operator status. Thus, he had not given the legacy mission directly to Lan Luofeng, but had chosen to submit it to his direct superior instead. He had been afraid that Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan would have gotten into trouble for the treasure they possessed, and be targeted and killed by those avaricious people who would do anything to get their hands on his legacy.

However, Ling Xiao had also known, that submitting it to his superior might mean that this legacy would never reach the hands of his child either. Thus, he had made further arrangements. He left a message for the old dean of the Central Scout Academy, hoping that once his child Ling Lan entered the scout academy, the dean would submit a request to the military on his behalf to get the legacy back. So that the old dean would put his back into it, Ling Xiao had agreed to release this legacy to the entire Central Scout Academy. Any child who could pass his tests would be able to obtain his legacy.

Ling Xiao had worked so hard to arrange all this — naturally, he didn't want anyone else to obtain his legacy. So, when creating the contents of the test, he had used a progressive advancement method, which would slowly eliminate any outsiders.

In the first round of tests, he had used the foundational combat arts of the scout academy, to give the impression that he was judging all the children equally. Although this set of combat arts was pretty much general knowledge, this round could successfully exclude all adults. He had set it to be a mirroring test, not just for testing purposes, but also to immediately chase out anyone whose body size exceeded 1.6

metres, eliminating almost all adults. This had caused all the fighters of the military who attempted the mission to fail in the very first round.

Of course, if Ling Lan had grown up before making contact with this legacy mission, she would also have been chased out and wouldn't have been able to obtain the legacy. However, Ling Xiao's legacy was only effective when practised at age 10 and below. After the age of 13, there was basically no chance of training according to the legacy anymore anyway. Ling Xiao could only hope that Ling Lan would be able to enter the legacy tests before she exceeded the age limit.

After ensuring that only children would be able to proceed, Ling Xiao had revealed his true intention from the second round onwards, by using the killing arts of the Ling family loyalists. This move pretty much killed all chances of any other children entering the following rounds of testing. Of course, if the military really wanted to, they could still find a way to get hold of the Ling family loyalists' killing arts and assist other children to enter the third round.

Therefore, in the third round, Ling Xiao had chosen to use a secret base only known to him and Lan Luofeng. Only Lan Luofeng would know how that lovely valley came to be.

Within the military camp, when did they ever have the chance to go out and see those beautiful sceneries? Even if they had entered the virtual world, they would have been stuck inside the 7th Division's world. In order to make Lan Luofeng happy, Ling Xiao had brought her into his mecha <Belief> and let <Belief> create an immersive holograph of that lovely valley scene. In her great delight, Lan Luofeng had playfully named it as the 'World of Belief'...

Chapter 105

The Real Token!

Ling Xiao believed, that Lan Luofeng would definitely tell Ling Lan about how they had met and fallen in love, and about his mecha. (On the second point, he was mistaken. Lan Luofeng hadn't told Ling Lan about his mecha, since Lan Luofeng believed that it was still a bit too early to tell Ling Lan about things to do with mecha.)

Fortunately, Lan Luofeng had once revealed that the place she most wanted to visit was the 'World of Belief', which had been recorded down by Little Four, allowing him to find the correct answer to that earlier question. It had to be said that Ling Lan had passed that test by the skin of her teeth. Still, even if Ling Lan had failed, she could have still gone home to ask Lan Luofeng for the correct answers and attempt the mission again later.

Ling Xiao had not restricted the number of times someone could take the tests, for he himself was afraid that his questions were too left-field that even Lan Luofeng might have forgotten about some of the answers.

Ling Xiao was also afraid that someone would succeed by pure chance, blurting out his mecha's name on a lucky guess, so he had set up another obstacle. If a candidate randomly entered any of the rooms from the main hall, Ling Xiao would let the candidate know the Ling family training methods. If the candidate trained hard with that, he or she would still be able to achieve imperial operator level — his father had trained with that set of methods back in those days; it was truly a pretty good training method.

In this manner, Ling Xiao would be able to pull the wool over everyone's eyes and continue to wait for his child to enter the mission for testing. Because, only his child would know that the Ling family mansion was split between the front and back sections, and be able to find the correct room.

Of the rooms in the back section, such as the bedrooms and other studies etcetera, it wasn't as complicated as Ling Lan had assumed. Ling Xiao only existed within his study. In other words, even if Ling Lan had gone into any of the other rooms, there would be no one there to assign any tasks. Only when she entered the study would she

see the holographic image Ling Xiao left behind.

But in the end, Ling Xiao had still been uneasy. After all, the military's strength was truly formidable — he had no way to guarantee that those loyalists from the Ling family mansion wouldn't betray him and leak the mansion's secrets to the military. So, he finally decided to add one last test. The content of this test was truly a secret belonging only to him and Lan Luofeng.

Mind you, Ling Xiao and Lan Luofeng's exclusive Duomo code had never been used on the outside before. In other words, this code was only known to the two of them. As such, the only people who would be able to answer this test would be Lan Luofeng, and one other — who was naturally the person who had personally learned the Duomo code from Lan Luofeng. Without a doubt, this other person could only be his child.

Just as Ling Xiao predicted, Ling Lan used the Duomo code to crack the final test.

Having thought of an answer, Ling Lan decisively turned and left the study. She went to the master bedroom and headed straight for the dressing table to find her mum's jewellery box.

Inside the jewellery box were some luxurious and exquisite accessories. Ling Lan casually pawed through them, but didn't find what she was looking for. She quickly cast it aside and changed directions. She walked to the singular large bed within the bedroom. Ling Lan was very familiar with this bed — she had been sleeping on it from birth. She had only said goodbye to it after she had been able to speak coherently enough to ask for her own bedroom.

During that time, she had found out that Lan Luofeng had a secret compartment to hide her precious things in on this bed. Ling Lan carefully felt along the edges of the bed, touched a spot, and then a small plasma screen suddenly emerged on the smooth headboard of the bed. There was a selection keyboard of 10 number keys displayed on it. Without having to think, Ling Lan directly entered the number code she knew by heart. If Lan Luofeng had never changed it, the code shouldn't be wrong.

After entering the code, it didn't take 5 seconds before the screen suddenly popped out, and an approximately 30 cm by 50 cm drawer appeared just like that before Ling Lan.

As expected, this secret compartment had long been here! The compartment was empty, nothing at all within it, except for an extremely exquisite little box. Ling Lan took out the box and opened it. A large, glittering diamond ring appeared before Ling Lan, shining radiantly under the lamp light. It was the wedding ring that her mum had cherished all this while.

Ling Lan's lips quirked in a slight smile, knowing she had found her target. She closed the box, and holding it in her hand, she made her way back to Ling Xiao's study.

Seeing her return, Ling Xiao asked with a half-smile, "Found what I want?"

Ling Lan just opened her right hand and showed Ling Xiao the box. Without saying a word, she peered intently at Ling Xiao.

The smile on Ling Xiao's lips grew wider. "This is the thing I want?"

Ling Lan still said nothing, only opening the box to reveal the large diamond ring inside it.

"This is your answer?" said Ling Xiao with a raised brow, waiting for Ling Lan's verbal confirmation.

"Lan Luofeng's wedding ring. You gave it to her," replied Ling Lan calmly.

Ling Xiao laughed uproariously. Then, his expression was admiring as he said, "Not bad. You actually found the answer. Could you tell me, how exactly did you figure out that this ring was the answer I wanted for this mission?"

"I only said that this was a wedding ring. I never said that this was the mission answer." Ling Lan's words stopped Ling Xiao's laughter in its tracks. He froze, stunned by Ling Lan's unexpected response.

This time, it was Ling Lan's turn to laugh. Hells, she had finally managed to give her heartless old man a taste of his own medicine! All this while, she had only been helplessly toyed around with by her old man.

Ling Xiao's awkwardness only lasted for a moment. He quickly collected himself, and said with some amusement, "In that case, why did you bring it here to show me?"

"Because, you need it to open the door to get the thing you need." Ling Lan took out

the ring and waved it at Ling Xiao.

"Oh? I really don't know what thing I need other than this ring. I'm very sorry, you've failed the mission." Ling Xiao's smile turned cold, and he mercilessly declared Ling Lan's failure. His clearly disappointed expression seemed to tell Ling Lan that she had really been mistaken.

"This is just a proposal ring, not a proposal token. Although it's only different by one word, what's wrong is wrong. Right? Oh, father of mine?" Ling Lan mercilessly tore apart Ling Xiao's lie. "Stop faking. If I were to really choose this diamond ring as my final answer, then the mission would truly be a failure."

Ling Xiao seemed utterly unmoved. He only sighed softly and said, "You've already come so far. If you fail just like this and go back, you'll probably be unable to accept it either. Let's do this. I'll give you one chance. I hope you'll be able to convince me."

Ling Lan knew that this was likely a part of her dad's test as well, and so did not bother being polite. She walked directly to stand behind her father and poked him with a finger, saying, "Dad, please move aside for a moment."

With an indulgent expression, Ling Xiao stood up, cooperatively giving up the study desk. Since he had already chosen to give the candidate a chance, let him do as he will.

Ling Lan brazenly sat down in the chair Ling Xiao had just vacated, and pulled out the middle drawer of the study table. She reached into it with an open palm, palm first, to lay her hand flat against the underneath of the desk surface. After waiting for 3 seconds, nothing changed. Ling Lan abruptly realised that within this memory of Ling Xiao's 8 years ago, the Ling family safe hadn't yet been programmed to recognise her fingerprints.

Moodily, Ling Lan stood up and said to Ling Xiao, "Lend me your palm."

That said, she pulled over her father's palm and placed it against the bottom of the table surface, holding it there for 3 seconds. Then, a soft, almost imperceptible click could be heard coming from a bookcase to the side.

Ling Lan walked right up to the fourth bookcase. The bookcase was already filled to bursting with all sorts of paper-based reading material. This sort of ancient reading method was rarely found anymore in this modern generation. Now, in this world, all existing paper-based reading material were old texts inherited from several centuries

up to even a millennium ago. Whenever a typical person saw this type of old texts, they would feel respect well out from within; they wouldn't dare to move around the texts recklessly, much less even try to touch these precious artefacts.

However, Ling Lan's following actions were barbaric. If her actions had been seen by any lovers of old books, she would most certainly be mobbed and critiqued to death.

Ling Lan savagely grabbed hold of one particular book and pulled harshly. The book was torn and a round shaped hole with many facets was revealed.

It turned out that Ling Lan had only torn off a protective back cover on the 'book'. Of course, if she hadn't used her father's palm print to unlock the cover first, even if Ling Lan had used all of her strength, she still wouldn't have been able to peel off this protective covering.

Ling Lan lined up the diamond side of the ring against that multi-faceted round hole, and it fit perfectly. This time, the wait was longer — after about 6 seconds, a 'clack' came from within the bookcase.

The book Ling Lan grabbed this time was just right beside the 'book' with a hole. This time, Ling Lan didn't pull, but pushed it forwards. Following that, the entire shelf of books abruptly disappeared, revealing a square safe about 30 cubic centimetres large.

Apparently, the diamond ring was only the key to open the safe. However, the diamond ring itself was also a test — if a candidate randomly lucked out during the search and found it, he would be tricked by Ling Xiao's earlier words and really take the diamond ring to be the real answer Ling Xiao wanted. In that scenario, what the candidate would receive in the end would still be that set of Ling family training methods and not Ling Xiao's true legacy.

Of course, if this were the real world, Ling Lan wouldn't even have to take the extra step to find the ring. Many times before this, when Lan Luofeng hadn't been around, Ling Lan had let Little Four 'communicate' directly with the A.I. of the safe, opening it easily that way.

However, right now, they were in the mission world, so Ling Lan had no choice but to be a little more careful. She didn't know what the consequences would be if she skipped this step — what if her old man was a stickler for tradition and required everything to follow its proper procedure? If she tried fooling around with any

shortcuts in that scenario, she would just be tanking her own chances. Ling Lan decided that it would be better to play it safe. She would rather spend a little more time and make sure this mission was completed properly.

Ling Lan skilfully entered the code to open the safe. Lan Luofeng had never changed the passcode, so the code she knew was the same as the one used here.

Inside the safe were plenty of antiques, along with many strange and rare odds and ends. They had all been collected by the many generations of Ling family heads, including some cool stuff that Ling Xiao himself had found, such as the exquisite writing brush Ling Lan had once used.

Ling Lan desultorily pawed through the items and picked out three from the pile. She placed them in front of Ling Xiao and said, "Dad, *this* is the proposal token you wanted. All three of them."

All three items looked exceedingly common — a white sheet of paper that could be bought from any road-side stall, a chip that couldn't be more common, and a keychain shaped like a mecha.

Chapter 106

Vision and Hand Speed!

That sheet of white paper was already filled with writing — it held the marriage vows Ling Xiao had written for Lan Luofeng! Every vow on the paper just proved that Ling Xiao was totally henpecked ¹.

The chip, was the control chip of Ling Xiao's wealth. With this chip alone, Lan Luofeng would be able to forcefully transfer all of Ling Xiao's worldly possessions to someone else's communicator without having to get Ling Xiao's approval.

Meanwhile, that keychain was modelled after Ling Xiao's mecha. What this really represented, or if there was any deeper meaning to it, Lan Luofeng had never told Ling Lan. She had only told Ling Lan that of these three things, the most valuable was actually this keychain, but now it had become just a souvenir...

Ling Xiao looked at the three items before him with a complicated expression, but he was clearly moved. However, he very quickly managed to calm his almost overflowing emotions and raised his head to smile blindingly at Ling Lan. "Congratulations, Ling Lan, you've passed. You shall receive Ling Xiao's legacy, my legacy... my child, I'm so very happy today!"

Ling Xiao's smile caused Ling Lan to become awestruck. Now she finally understood why her mum would always lose her mind in fantasies whenever she talked about her dad — her dad's sincere smile was just too stunning. Even in this future world where one could find beautiful men and women everywhere, her dad's looks were definitely still of the godlike legendary level.

Ling Xiao made Ling Lan stand before him. At this moment, he was silent. After a long while, a light trace of loss appeared on his expression, and he said, "Honestly, I don't wish for this legacy mission to appear. Because, its appearance would mean that I'm really gone. If possible, I really want to accompany my wife, and be by your side as you grow up... I can't bear to let you both go. My child, I don't even know if you're a boy or a girl. I really wish I could see for myself how you look like, whether you resemble me or your mum..."

Ling Xiao's loss of composure lasted for only a split second; he soon regained his equilibrium and said self-mockingly, "What's with this sentimentality... is this the result of the wavering of belief? What a terrible feeling."

Ling Xiao recovered his usual smile once more and looked at Ling Lan. The nameless tenderness in his gaze caused Ling Lan's heart to spasm, as all sorts of emotions rose up within her heart.

Ling Lan knew very well that Ling Xiao was definitely not looking at her right now. This Ling Xiao was a manifestation of spiritual energy from 8 years ago — perhaps this affectionate gaze was meant for Lan Luofeng, and maybe included some anticipation for his then unborn child? But for some unknown reason, this scene just tugged at Ling Lan's heartstrings, making her heart ache. She didn't know if it was because she had merged with this body completely, causing her to be unable to control her emotions when faced with this body's biological father.

Ling Xiao said, "I believe that my child is the strongest child. I will entrust your mum to you. You must definitely make her happy! I'm an irresponsible husband, and also an irresponsible father. I've failed you both."

Ling Lan tried to speak, but Ling Xiao made a stopping motion, "Don't speak. Let me hold on to my fantasy a while longer... you will call me 'Daddy' earnestly, and then say 'I love you'."

That said, Ling Xiao smiled bitterly and said hoarsely, "Isn't that just a useless daydream? An irresponsible person like me... if I get a scolding, it would already be too easy on me. What right do I have to ask you, my child, to call me 'daddy' ²?"

Ling Lan's mouth twitched, but she did not call out 'daddy' in the end. Although she knew that Ling Xiao was her dad of this life, and Ling Xiao was extremely familiar to her due to the constant reminiscences of her mum... The address of 'daddy' was really quite difficult for the mentally mature Ling Lan to voice out.

Ling Lan could only put the blame on this man across from her — he was just too young, causing her mind to inexplicably rebel against the very idea.

Dejection flashed through Ling Xiao's gaze; those words of his were actually an indirect plea for his child to call him 'daddy'. He didn't dare to ask directly, because he felt he had wronged his child.

Sadly, the truth was really just as he had feared. His child truly hated him and was unwilling to call him 'daddy' — this reality made him feel very hurt. The Ling Xiao of 8 years ago had imagined many possibilities of this encounter, and this was one which he had most hoped not to see...

Regardless of how dejected Ling Xiao felt, he still began to teach his first lesson.

Ling Lan thought that the first lesson would be Ling Xiao's exclusive physical skills or something along those lines — mind you, the very first lesson she received when she first entered the learning space, and also when she first entered the Central Scout Academy, was physical skills (other than theoretical studies). After all, the basics were the most important.

"Are you wondering why we aren't starting with physical skills?" asked the Ling Xiao of 8 years ago, having predicted Ling Lan's puzzlement.

Since Ling Xiao was the one to ask, Ling Lan naturally nodded without any hesitation, and waited for Ling Xiao to explain.

Smiling, Ling Xiao told Ling Lan that the academy's basic physical skills set was the accumulation of the efforts of countless talents over tens of thousands of years. It was definitely one of the best foundational physical skills set available, so before Ling Lan fully mastered that set of physical skills, he would not teach Ling Lan any other physical skills, including his own exclusive physical skills. Many people, before their basics had been built properly, would already attempt to learn physical skills or spiritual skills of a higher level — this was completely wrong. Think about it. If you try to build a building when your foundations haven't even been settled yet, how would you be able to build a tall building?

Ling Xiao was unsure how the other legendary operators had advanced to their level, but Ling Xiao's advancement was closely tied to his foundations. Back then, Ling Xiao had only wanted to prove himself to his father his own way, and so had refused to learn the Ling family's secret physical skills. Instead, he had trained in the academy's foundational physical skills until he mastered it to its extreme. In the process, he had touched on the most profound meaning of foundational physical skills, which showed him a path to advance to legendary status...

"What does it mean to fully master it?" asked Ling Lan, puzzled. She already knew the foundational physical skills by heart — could it be that she still hadn't been doing it

right?

"When you can execute this set of physical skills without having to think about it, no longer limited to the stances — about then, you will naturally understand," explained Ling Xiao briefly. He didn't want Ling Lan to be impatient — she was still young and had plenty of time.

"Now, what I *can* teach you is how to improve your eyesight and hand speed. These are things that you cannot lack for either combat or operating mecha," said Ling Xiao. "They are both things that require hard work to train, especially finger speed. That needs to be trained beginning from youth, while the bones of the fingers haven't fully grown yet and are still extremely flexible. Only then can you develop your personal limits to its maximum."

That said, Ling Xiao suddenly lifted up a palm. A clear and translucent round bead was clamped between two of his fingers. And then all his fingers started to dance, causing the bead to tumble freely amidst the five fingers. It started out slow, but the speed gradually became faster and faster — in the end, Ling Lan, who took pride in her eyesight, couldn't even see a shadow of the bead anymore. Ling Xiao's fingers had become mere afterimages in the air, so quick that she couldn't even tell which finger was which...

Just as Ling Lan was staring as if in a trance, Ling Xiao suddenly folded his fingers to make a fist. The abrupt shift from movement to stillness disoriented Ling Lan's eyes, making them ache, extremely uncomfortable.

"Your vision hasn't reached the level of my hand speed, which is why you feel the strain. Close your eyes and rest for a bit." Ling Lan did as Ling Xiao said, and soon found that her eyes no longer felt stretched and achy. Only then did she open her eyes again.

"That's where the limit of your eyesight is. You feel it now? From now on, you must train your hand speed. At the same time, you must get your vision up to the level of your hand speed. This requires slow and steady training. There is no shortcut," said Ling Xiao to Ling Lan. Legacy missions weren't as miraculous as most people thought — there is no way for someone to ascend to the heavens in one step. To succeed, it all still depended on your own effort to earn it; the legacy mission would only show you how to do so more efficiently, that's all.

"I understand." Ling Lan nodded, heart filled with gratitude for Ling Xiao's mentoring. As he trained her hand speed and vision, Ling Xiao had indirectly been telling Ling Lan that, to become strong, she needed to rely on her own efforts — no one else could do it for her.

"Just now, was that already your fastest speed?" Ling Lan, who was in a great mood, finally displayed the curiosity a 7 year old child should have.

Ling Xiao only smiled silently, but spread out his fingers once more. In his palm was no longer just the one crystal bead from before, but a whole nine beads. Ling Lan found herself tongue-tied with astonishment. Before she could find her voice to ask, Ling Xiao's fingers started moving once more. The nine crystal beads collided with each other within his palm, emitting clear and reverberating bell-like sounds. As they collided with one another, the beads started bouncing irregularly — this was the hardest thing to control, because you had to predict where each bead would go. Ling Lan was sure she could control one bead with no pressure, two if the speed wasn't too fast, but three would be tricky.

However, Ling Xiao easily controlled all nine beads, his fingers flying swiftly to block every single one before they could fall, only allowing them to roll around in his palm.

Gradually, Ling Xiao's speed became faster and faster, until finally, the sounds of the beads colliding meshed into one solid sound, no gaps between collisions. At this point, Ling Lan could no longer see what was going on in Ling Xiao's hand — everything was just a blur.

Ling Lan thought that this was already the limit, but unexpectedly, something even more astonishing happened. Gradually, Ling Lan couldn't even see the blur of shadows anymore... It was as if Ling Xiao had spread open his palm like a lotus flower, but there was no sign of those beads within it.

Ling Lan knew this was a false impression; Ling Xiao's speed had just reached a frightening level, enough to fool the eyes into registering this illusion, defaulting back into the original setting. This was a misperception, an illusion born of sheer overwhelming speed.

Before Ling Lan could regain her senses, she heard several consecutive clacking noises, nine in total. Following these sounds, Ling Xiao abruptly stopped the motions of his fingers. At this moment, Ling Lan felt a throbbing pain in her eyes, and tears

begin to spill over from them in a flood. They had been working too hard to try and see a speed too far beyond their limits, and had finally incurred the backlash.

It took a while, but Ling Lan finally felt comfortable again. She opened her eyes and saw Ling Xiao standing before her with a smile, his right hand in a loose fist.

"I'm alright now," said Ling Lan embarrassedly. She focused her attention on Ling Xiao's right hand.

Ling Xiao slowly opened his right palm. In the middle of his palm, the initially solid crystal beads had been turned into a heap of powder. Ling Xiao shook his fingers lightly, and the fine powder scattered, sifting through his fingers to drift slowly to the ground. Under the refraction of the light, the crystal powder sparkled, sending out countless glimmering rays, immersing the two of them in an illusion of a magical realm.

Chapter 107

Transported to the Capital?

Ling Lan wasn't bedazzled by this magical scene; her expression changed slightly in awareness. Although Ling Lan hadn't been able to see what was going on in Ling Xiao's palm earlier, she could tell that Ling Xiao's fingers hadn't been exerting much pressure; he had just simply been blocking the paths of those crystal beads to prevent them from falling off his palm. But it was precisely this sort of forceless pressure that, under the workings of extreme speed, had shattered the crystal beads from the inside out. It was clear to see just how much destructive power it had.

"Looks like, you've understood." Ling Xiao was very pleased with Ling Lan's reaction. He had thought that he would have to explain in further detail, but unexpectedly, Ling Lan had actually grasped the deeper meaning already.

"Yep, when anything reaches a certain limit, a great energy will be created," said Ling Lan carefully, summarizing her thoughts.

Ling Lan was very excited internally, because she had finally met someone she could discuss these things with. In the learning space, her instructors only let her feel things out for herself, never ever telling her much about Dao, causing Ling Lan to feel extremely lost.

"That's right. I didn't expect you to notice that point. I call it 'Shi' ¹, and there isn't just one type of Shi, but many. However, Ling Lan, you must remember not to bite off more than you can chew. More Shi is not always better." Ling Xiao glanced coolly at Ling Lan, rapidly cooling down her initially bubbling excitement.

Ling Xiao's reminder caused Ling Lan to become thoughtful. After that, Ling Xiao didn't let Ling Lan remain for long in the mission space. He only told her that in future, she could access this place directly to find him by using his spirit crystal, with no need to take the test again. Then, Ling Lan was immediately sent back to the login point of the academy's virtual world.

"You finally appeared, Boss!" When Little Four saw Ling Lan, he burst out in tears and pounced on her, clearly upset.

Ling Lan reflexively caught hold of Little Four, and cautioned him saying, "You coming out like this, won't it be suspicious?"

Little Four sniffled, "It's no problem, Boss. This is a special space I created. We can see outside, but they can't see us."

"Right, in the mission space, why did you become silent after I arrived at the Ling family mansion?" Ling Lan had thought it strange. If she hadn't been afraid that her dad wouldn't acknowledge it, she would really have liked to just let Little Four open the safe directly. She had originally thought that Little Four would jump out straightaway to critique her dad's pedantry, but Little Four had been surprisingly silent and non-reactive.

Back then, she had been too caught up with the mission, so although Ling Lan was puzzled, she didn't have the mind to go ask Little Four about it. But now, Ling Lan's curiosity was back.

Ling Lan's words caused Little Four to recall his misery, and he started crying once more. Under Ling Lan's consolation, he managed to tell her the reason in between sobs — apparently, when Ling Lan had entered the study and seen Ling Xiao smiling face, what greeted Little Four had instead been Ling Xiao's sharp and cold gaze. That piercing gaze had scrambled Little Four's operations, kicking him right out of the legacy space. This was also the reason why Little Four had been unresponsive — he had been kicked out by Ling Xiao at that point.

Ling Lan frowned, a little worried. Did this mean that anyone with strong spiritual strength would be able to discover Little Four's existence?

Little Four sensed Ling Lan's anxiety for him, and his core chip actually started to heat up. However, this heat was warm and very comfortable, cheering him up immensely. He said then to Ling Lan, "Boss, don't worry. I've met other people before with great mental and spiritual energy, but they never noticed me. Perhaps it was because I entered your dad's legacy space, which is equivalent to entering his spiritual self, that's why he noticed me."

"Hmm, yup, what you say makes sense. Still, please be careful after this. Don't simply go into other people's spiritual self. Let's avoid the risk." Ling Lan felt that what Little Four said made sense, but still cautioned Little Four to be more careful in the virtual world from now on. He shouldn't get too caught up in thinking he was a god.

The two of them talked for a little bit longer. During this time, Little Four was multitasking — he was also controlling the fake Ling Lan he had created to walk out of the library and slowly make its way to the login point. Then, he made the fake Ling Lan go through the motions of logging out.

Due to expending so much brainpower during the legacy mission, Ling Lan was somewhat fatigued. So, she logged out of the virtual world together with Little Four and went off to take a good long rest.

Meanwhile, due to Little Four's thorough arrangements, neither the monitoring military nor the other students entering for the test noticed that Ling Lan had already sneakily obtained Ling Xiao's legacy. To create the false impression that the legacy mission was still uncracked, Little Four left the virtual pocket testing space up. Until one day, it disappeared along with Ling Xiao's legacy mission, throwing the military into disarray, unable to figure out what had happened...

After Ling Lan received her father's legacy, she began practising the bead exercise every day with both hands at the same time. Of course, Ling Lan did not practise with those precious crystal beads, but with sturdy steel beads instead.

Qi Long and the others, who had been hanging out with Ling Lan all this while, saw Ling Lan forever carrying around two steel beads to fiddle with, and was overcome with curiosity. So they asked Ling Lan why she was doing so.

Ling Lan felt that this was not any special training method that she needed to keep secret — Ling Xiao himself had said before that this was just a small technique to train up hand speed, the key was whether one had enough determination to keep working on it without giving up. Thus, she generously told them what she was doing, and explained what benefits the training would bring.

When Qi Long and the others heard this, they immediately had stars in their eyes. Hand speed had always been a troublesome issue for fighters and mecha operators —

even though the Federation had also tried to develop some training methods to increase hand speed, the effectiveness of those methods was limited, yielding only slight improvements. The moment one hit a bottleneck, there would be no more effect from then onwards.

The others in the group rushed to follow Ling Lan and train together, and so a trend swept through the Central Scout Academy — several bored students of the second grade Class-A, no matter if they were reading, eating, or chatting, would always be seen fiddling with a small steel bead in their hands, rolling it round and round in their palms...

Just like that, they trained steadily for several months, and Ling Lan abruptly found that she had not experienced any improvement in an entire month. Every night, using three steel beads simultaneously, her training would break down at the 3.0127 minute mark. For a whole month she struggled and hovered on this time frame, and Ling Lan just knew that she had encountered her first bottleneck.

Ling Lan really wanted to break through this bottleneck, so she specially increased the practise time for hand speed... but the more impatient she was, the worse the effect. Ling Lan found that after several consecutive days of forceful extended training, her hand speed actually deteriorated to a certain degree instead. She knew then that she couldn't continue this sort of self-punishing training anymore, otherwise, not only would there be no effect, she may even cause some unnecessary problem to appear in her two hands.

Ling Lan decided to rest well for a bit — besides the missions from the learning space which had never stopped, whether it was in reality or within the virtual world, Ling Lan chose to stop everything. Her typically busy life abruptly became free, causing her to feel a little out of sorts.

Seeing his boss's clear discomfort, Little Four thought of a good way to kill time and relax at the same time. He prepared an adult appearance for Ling Lan to use in the virtual network so that she could go explore the virtual world outside and expand her horizons.

Little Four's suggestion touched Ling Lan deeply. After all, she had never been to the real virtual world — the virtual world of the Central Scout Academy, at the end of the day, was just a platform for the students to familiarise themselves with the virtual world.

Immediate action is better than anticipation — that very afternoon, Ling Lan made Little Four get everything ready, and then she logged into the virtual world, prepared for her first foray into the outside world.

Ling Lan entered the login point — it was still the same hall she had first logged into, no changes whatsoever. At first, Ling Lan thought Little Four had forgotten about modifying her appearance, so she said moodily, "Little Four, why didn't you help to change my appearance?" Sigh, a kid was still a kid after all, easily dropping the ball at crucial moments.

Speechless, Little Four made a floor-length mirror appear in front of Ling Lan, presenting Ling Lan's current appearance to her.

"Hehehe..." giggled Ling Lan in embarrassment. It turned out that Ling Lan's appearance had already been changed. When Ling Lan had logged in, Little Four had immediately modified her brainwaves, helping her into her virtual disguise instantaneously.

Ling Lan's current form was that of a girl around sixteen years old, in the flower of her youth — her looks bore some resemblance to the Ling Lan of her last life, with a steam-bun face ² and a pair of big lively eyes, extremely alert and adorable.

"This appearance... isn't it just too 'kawaii' ³?" She looked like a total loli ⁴! Ling Lan felt a little awkward. To be honest, she had already gotten used to her shota ⁵ face of this life that leaned more towards the boyish side.

"This way, no one will ever suspect that you're Ling Lan!" Little Four was perplexed. He had gone to so much effort to create a human appearance that was completely different from the current Ling Lan — why would Boss have any complaints?

"That's true." Ling Lan finally got with the program. If they had fashioned an appearance that had similar qualities to her current self, though the probability of being discovered was still very low, there was always the slight chance she would be discovered. Little Four had really considered everything very thoroughly.

Ling Lan didn't hold back her admiration, showering Little Four generously with praise, sending Little Four straight into a happy daze.

When he heard Ling Lan request to go to the capital, still hazy with pleasure, Little Four didn't look at the name of the planet, choosing a capital quickly and beginning

their transportation...

Cough cough, who asked every planet to have a capital? Little Four had just sent Ling Lan off when he noticed the problem. However, Little Four didn't dare to say anything. He had just received Ling Lan's praise — if he revealed his mistake now, wouldn't that just be slapping himself in the face? Besides, planet Azure's capital was still a capital! His boss hadn't really specified that she wanted to go to the capital of planet Doha...

At this point, Ling Lan had no idea that her current position was already no longer on the planet of Doha where she lived. Instead, she was now on planet Azure, a planet on the fringes of the Federation several hundred thousands of light-years away.

Ling Lan stood at the transfer point, looking around in shock and surprise at the vintage scene before her. She could almost believe that she had returned to the olden times. *"I thought that the capital should be even more advanced and futuristic than the city we live in. Who knew it'd be this traditional?"*

"Every city's setting is different. The capitals here all have more traditional settings." Little Four secretly wiped the sweat off his forehead; at least that excuse had sounded somewhat plausible.

Chapter 108

A Dangerous Man!

"That's true. But compared to a modern science-fiction type setting, I like this better." Ling Lan smiled. The familiar architecture and the familiar surroundings made her feel at ease instantly, sweeping away the tiredness that had been accumulated over several months of high-intensity training.

When Little Four heard that Ling Lan liked it here, all his nerves and anxiety fled. Now wasn't this just a fortuitous mistake? Thinking of this, Little Four started to become a little smug — *as I thought, I'm really the smartest intelligent bio-entity. Even when I make a mistake, I make it in such a perfect way!*

Leaving Little Four's private celebration aside, Ling Lan brought Little Four along as she toured the entire capital city. Of course, she was only window shopping. For one, this identity didn't have a corresponding central bank account, and so had no way to pay with credits. Although Little Four could have found a way to handle it, Ling Lan was of the mind that they should avoid doing unnecessary things to avoid trouble. Most importantly, she was afraid that the central bank would run scans at irregular intervals — if anything was exposed, it would be troublesome for both her and Little Four.

Secondly, this identity also didn't have any safe dummy mailing address. Was she supposed to get the stores to deliver anything she bought to the Ling family estates? Then what would be the point of going to the trouble of making this fake identity?

Ling Lan was just like an imprisoned bird which had been set free — she was full of enthusiasm no matter what she saw. Being able to freely walk the streets and browse was fulfilling a dream of hers which spanned both her lives.

In her previous life, she had always been confined to her sickbed. She dreamt every day of having the chance to go out and explore the streets, but unfortunately, till the end, that dream had never been realised. And then, since she had been born in this world, she had always been restricted to her home. And after that, she became restricted to the scout academy — although the virtual world of the scout academy also had shops, the items they offered were extremely monotonous, all having

something to do with learning. Furthermore, the shops were all too science-fictiony, so Ling Lan just couldn't experience any of the enjoyment of regular shopping there.

However, this capital was completely different. The classical buildings, as well as the decorations of the stores were all very similar to that of the stores in her previous life, giving her the satisfying feeling of 'flattening a road'¹. Her mood was endlessly buoyant.

If it weren't for the fact that every time she entered a store, a store introduction would pop up right before her eyes, Ling Lan might have believed that she was actually browsing a real street.

The capital truly lived up to its status as the capital. Whether it was in terms of fashion, food, activity, or accommodation, the sheer variety was dazzling. Just as Ling Lan was engrossed in her sightseeing, the people around her, who had also been busy with their shopping, suddenly stopped walking, as if receiving some unknown signal. On their faces were expressions of excitement. Some of them even yelled out involuntarily.

Very quickly, they changed their personal plans, all of them heading mutually towards the same direction.

"*What's going on?*" Ling Lan was a little bewildered by this, and hurried to ask Little Four.

Without delay, Little Four immediately began a search. Then, with a surprised expression, he said, "*There's actually a mecha combat tournament happening here. And it's a cross-level J6 challenge against a J8, can this be real?*"

Ling Lan, who knew almost nothing about the world outside in this life, said dumbly, "*J6? J8? What's that?*"

Little Four slapped his forehead; only now did he remember that he had forgotten to supplement Ling Lan's knowledge on this front. So, he quickly gave a general overview of what mecha combat tournaments were all about.

In the virtual world, this mecha combat tournament was actually a type of combat game that was open to all members of the public. Any citizen could participate in the combat game as long as they were 13 years old and above. Meanwhile, the students of the scout academy could get rid of the seal of the scout academy once they turned 13,

and enter the real virtual world. In other words, if they followed the normal schedule, Ling Lan would only be able to come here after she turned 13.

Regardless of age, any newbie who just started the game would be at level J0. They needed to learn how to operate mecha and go through related combat training before unlocking the newbie arena. After earning 100 points, they would successfully move forward into level J1; and after accumulating 1000 points, they'd enter level J2. Calculating forwards from this, you can just imagine what an astronomical number of points was needed to achieve level J9.

Little Four told Ling Lan that very few mecha operators managed to advance to level J9 — of the billions of people in the entire Federation, there were only about three to four thousand people who had done it. Of course, there is also a level higher than J9, but those people who could achieve it would not bother with this sort of mecha combat game for the masses. Little Four didn't elaborate much on that, for he felt that these things were still a little too far off for Ling Lan to worry about.

"It's lucky then that cross-level challenges are allowed?" Otherwise, going according to the regular flow, slowly accumulating points bit by bit, who knows how many months and years it would take to enter J9? Ling Lan felt a little dizzy just looking at the countless number of zeroes behind that extrapolated number.

"It's allowed, but the conditions for a cross-level challenge is very strict. If a challenger fails, the punishment may make the person regret it so much that they'd kill themselves..." said Little Four in a flat tone. Advantages are not so easily obtained.

"For a cross-level challenge, winning one fight isn't enough. You would have to consecutively defeat three randomly selected high-level opponents over the course of three days before your cross-level challenge is considered successful. Only then will you really enter the ranks of that level. But if you lose, the point deduction is extremely harsh. Take that J6 for example, he might very likely lose so many marks that he would fall directly back to level J3, maybe even J2." Little Four explained the rules and punishment related to this cross-level challenge.

"Well, it still seems worth it. Even if he falls down to J2 or J3, he can just challenge a J7 or J8 next time. As long as he can manage 3 wins sometime, won't he be right back up?" said Ling Lan, disagreeing.

"How could it be that easy? Each person only has three chances to initiate a cross-level

challenge every year. Unless he wins all three times, otherwise, if he loses just once, he would have to start over and accumulate points again. As everyone knows, points are extremely hard to collect in the mecha combat tournaments. It requires a lot of time and matches. More importantly, the so-called cross-level challenges are actually just a cross-1-level challenge. A J2 can only challenge a J4, a J3 can only challenge a J5... so even if he waits a whole year, he still wouldn't be able to return to his original position. Boss, do you still think this kind of cross-level challenge is worth it?"

Little Four's words stunned Ling Lan. "So that's how it is. Then, isn't the cross-level challenge just for show? Probably very few people would choose to try a cross-level challenge, right?" It looked like the creator of the game really hated people who took shortcuts, actually posing such imposing restrictions and obstacles.

"Of course, otherwise the people here wouldn't be so worked up over this current challenge. There might still be many cross-level challenges in the lower levels, but a high-level cross-level challenge is very rarely seen. Especially this type of J6 vs J8 challenge — I've heard that you might not even see one within 100 years. Boss, you're really quite lucky." Little Four reported everything he had learned from his searches to Ling Lan, telling her that this upcoming mecha fight was really very uncommon.

"Then let's go take a look." Ling Lan's interest was thoroughly piqued by Little Four. They moved along with the crowd towards their destination — a seven-storey tall pagoda.

"Drats, we need to buy tickets." Ling Lan was about to walk through the entrance when a line of text suddenly appeared before her. Her mood fell — apparently tickets were required to enter.

This was also the first time Little Four was entering a battle stadium to watch a mecha fight, so he hadn't known they had needed tickets either. Hearing Ling Lan's words, he said, *"Wait one moment,"* and disappeared.

Ling Lan thought that Little Four would be away for some time, but surprisingly, it had only been a few seconds when Little Four returned. He made a victory pose with his hands and said smugly, *"Boss, everything's settled."*

As Little Four was speaking, another person completely covered up in a black windbreaker was just about to buy the ticket number he was interested in when a notification popped up on his communicator: "Sorry, the ticket number you've

selected is no longer available. Please make a new selection."

"Eh? Weird, someone was actually faster than me? It's been taken..." muttered the person to himself. He had no choice but to choose the seat right next to the one he had wanted. Seeing the words 'purchase successful' appear, he closed his communicator and walked into the battle stadium.

At this moment, Little Four was extremely pleased with himself. He had finally gotten the chance to show off his skills as an omnipotent underling in front of Ling Lan — for a godlike existence like him, sneaking Ling Lan in without a ticket was nothing.

Um... no, Little Four was an obedient babe — he would never do this sort of underhanded thing. He was just... doing a favour, yep, doing a favour by showing up to watch.

Receiving Little Four's confirmation, Ling Lan walked towards the entrance of the battle stadium once more. This time, the words that appeared before her was no longer a reminder to buy a ticket. Instead, the words were a welcome — thank you for your patronage, your seat number is XX-section XX-row XX-number.

Ling Lan sighed in wonder yet again; Little Four was truly very useful. Whether it was in the real world or in the virtual world, she just couldn't get by without Little Four's help.

Ling Lan stepped through the gates and felt the scenery twist before eyes. And then, she found herself standing at the entrance to a random passage, rows and rows of seats before her.

"Could you please give way?" An icy voice rang out from behind Ling Lan. She quickly turned and saw a man in a windbreaker standing there. What surprised Ling Lan was that the man's face was almost wrapped up completely by the large hood of the windbreaker — only his lower jaw and slightly quirked thin lips could be seen from within its shadow.

"Uh... sorry." Ling Lan ducked her head apologetically, and hurried to give way. Her head lowered, Ling Lan did not let the other discover her shock. She clenched her fists tightly, annoyed at herself for being careless.

Just now, Ling Lan actually hadn't sensed the presence of anyone behind her. This was the first time someone had been able to get close to her without her noticing — if the

other had had any bad intentions and ambushed her, she would definitely have been KO-ed directly and become deader than dead.

And when she had faced the man, a pressing sense of danger had risen from her heart. This was the first time she could actually feel danger emanating from a person's body.

The man did not say anything, only nodding at Ling Lan lightly to signify thanks before moving past Ling Lan. It looked like he was also an audience member who had come to watch the match.

Ling Lan did not follow after him right away; she was still a little wary of that man, and decided that it would be a better idea to keep some distance from him. The man finally walked off into the distance, far enough that Ling Lan could no longer see his silhouette. Then, she heard Little Four say, *"Oh crap, that fellow is a hacker... no, he's very likely one of those rumoured spectres."*

"Little Four, by spectre, do you mean those beings capable of wiping out a person's consciousness in the virtual world?"

"Of course! The aura of that person is very similar — it's a type of spiritual mutation that belongs to a spectre hacker," confirmed Little Four.

Even within the virtual world, Ling Lan could feel cold sweat breaking out on her forehead at these words. No wonder she had sensed so much danger from the man — it turned out that he was a being who could kill someone without a trace... Boo hoo hoo, this virtual world was really very dangerous.

Even if Ling Lan could KO a person like this a hundred thousand times over in real life, in the virtual world, she still needed to give these people a wide berth.

Chapter 109

God View!

"Boss, do you want to know that person's real identity? I can go find out!" Little Four's eyes were sparkling, as if he had found some great new toy.

Ling Lan was just about to agree when she suddenly grew cautious and asked, "How are you planning to find out?"

Little Four said excitedly, "Of course by infiltrating the other's spiritual self! Then I'll be able to see the other's true identity."

"Not allowed!" barked Ling Lan fiercely inside the mind-space.

Ling Lan had not forgotten about what had happened within her dad's mission space. Little Four had said then that a strong person's spiritual self would be able to discover him, and may even take control of Little Four to harm him. Who knew if this hacker-evolved spectre would be able to cause some catastrophic damage to Little Four?

"Why?" Little Four was taken aback by Ling Lan's sharp rebuke. Mind you, even when Ling Lan had been applying domestic violence in the past, she had never before treated him so sternly. That scary expression and tone of voice didn't just shock Little Four but also hurt him. He wilted, a depressed expression on his face. He started to wonder if Ling Lan didn't like him anymore, treating him this way.

"First off, we have no conflict with him. Why poke a sleeping tiger? If we anger him, and he decides to come after us, we'll be in a lot of trouble..."

Little Four was just about to say that he wasn't at all afraid of that, because he could handle everything just fine, but Ling Lan pressed down on his little shoulder at that moment. She said earnestly, "Most importantly, I don't want you, Little Four, to be in danger. If anything happened to you, I would regret it for the rest of my life. So, Little Four, you must promise me. You must protect yourself well, so that you can stay by my side forever and ever, until the day I leave this world..."

Hearing this little speech by Ling Lan, all of Little Four's sadness and resentment

disappeared... he felt as if his CPU was overloaded — not just that, his core chip was starting to heat up, becoming hotter and hotter, almost reaching critical levels. He should have been frantic and panicked, and tried to find a way to cool his core chip down rapidly... but, goddammit, he just didn't want to. He even felt that the existence of this heat was truly wondrous — he loved this feeling so much he could die.

Ling Lan saw Little Four's slack and unresponsive face and was afraid he hadn't understood what she had been trying to say. So, with emphasis, she repeated again, "Little Four, listen, I forbid you from going off on your own from now on to investigate the spiritual selves of anyone strong or dangerous. As long as the other leaves us alone, we'll leave them alone too. Remember, you must protect yourself. Didn't you want to be my number one follower? If you don't listen to me, I'll take away your precious number one follower position." Ling Lan decided that a threat was necessary along with the warning to show just how serious she was about this.

At this point, Little Four had already lost all ability to think, but that grand goal of being the number one follower had always been a top priority in his heart, so when he heard Ling Lan's warning threat, he hurriedly nodded obediently, giving up any thought of checking out that man.

He could lose anything else, but that number one follower position must not be lost! This was Little Four's only major ambition ever since he had become aware.

In that case, he would let that man go this time. Still... Little Four finally returned to normal. His CPU was no longer running on overdrive, and his chip was no longer in danger of shorting. He looked towards the direction where the man had vanished and fiercely swung his fist into the air. He was determined to not let that man hurt his boss, otherwise, even if he had to go against his boss's words, he would still give that man a piece of his mind.

After obtaining Little Four's promise, Ling Lan could finally relax. She waited for a few minutes, then slowly made her way to the designated eating area at the front to look for her seat.

It should be said that looking for a seat in the virtual world was extremely easy — the moment she entered the seating area, a chart of the seating layout automatically appeared before her eyes. A red light was blinking on one of the seats on the chart, while a green dot was gradually moving forwards. Yup, that green dot was herself.

Very quickly, Ling Lan had followed the chart to find her seat. Once she sat down, the chart before her eyes disappeared, and she regained her usual vision.

Ling Lan looked around curiously at the audience around her. A familiar outfit caught her eye, rendering her speechless instantly, curse words pouring out in a torrent inside her mind... Why was she so unlucky? Actually meeting up once again with this dangerous fellow.

It turned out that Ling Lan's neighbouring seat was occupied by that dangerous man with a mutating mentality who was evolving into a spectre. However, the man's attitude was not bad — when he saw Ling Lan approaching, he nodded slightly in greeting.

"Uh... hello!" Ling Lan squeezed out a weak smile before turning away moodily.

Even so, Ling Lan wasn't really all that scared inside. Although the other was very dangerous, the two of them were just passing strangers with no bad blood between them; it was unlikely that the other would harm her for no reason.

Furthermore, although Ling Lan had forbidden Little Four from exploring, she knew that if the other tried to do something bad to her, Little Four would definitely counterattack and protect her from getting injured. In addition, Ling Lan was very confident in her own abilities. As long as she could hold off the other's sneak attack at the start, it wouldn't be that easy to harm her afterwards. She was mostly unrivalled within the Central Scout Academy — although she was a little weaker within the virtual world, she wasn't so weak that she would be completely helpless against attack. In short, Ling Lan felt prepared no matter what happened.

Just like that, Ling Lan regained her equilibrium once more and turned to coolly survey the battle stadium.

The battle stadium was large, so large that it was rather frightening. It was a lot like an enlarged version of the basketball stadiums of her previous world, just that the rectangular court in the middle had been changed into a huge circular ring. On all sides were audience stands, packed tightly one level after another. Ling Lan carefully counted and found that there were actually as many as 12 levels from top to bottom. By her estimations, this stadium could hold up to 500,000 audience members — if compared to her previous world, this venue would definitely be considered one of the more massive stadiums. If this building existed in reality, what an enormous structure

it would be.

Ling Lan sighed; the architecture of the future was heading more and more towards massive sizes, it seemed. Currently, Ling Lan didn't know that this mecha battle stadium that she found so massive was actually just a small venue in this world. Planet Azure was a third-rate planet, so its capital was also considered a third-rate city — it could only have this sort of small mecha battle stadium.

The capital of a second-rate planet would be able to possess a medium-sized stadium, which could hold 800,000 people. Meanwhile, a first-rate planet could have a large stadium, which could hold 10,000,000 people. As for the capitals of capital planets like Doha, they could have giant stadiums. These stadiums could hold up to 20,000,000 people — now that's what you would really call an enormous structure. All we can say is that the current Ling Lan was really a country bumpkin, having seen very little of the real world thus far.

It wasn't long before the entire stadium was filled with people, a crowd of heads all packed together. Soon, the sound of a bell rang out beside their ears — the sound of this bell was very melodious, sounding more like the tinkling of water than a metal bell.

Following this sound, warm applause broke out across the whole stadium. At the same time, two mecha slowly descended from the skies, making their way down slowly to land on the ground.

One of the mecha was entirely red while the other was a sheet of silver. When Ling Lan focused on any one of the mecha, the image before her eyes would reveal that mecha's basic information. From this, Ling Lan found out that the red mecha was the J6 challenger, while the silver mecha was the J8 recipient of the challenge.

The two mecha belonged to two different categories of mecha. The red mecha was a winged transformer type mecha — its advantage was optimum flexibility in the air, and it could switch freely between a humanoid shape and a pure aviation model — considered a mecha suited for both land and air. Its right arm was equipped with a beam gun, while its left hand was left empty for general use. The sides of its two legs each held one high-alloy dagger, and below its wings were several high-efficiency guided missiles. Of course, this was just standard regulation equipment; as for whether there were any hidden secret weapons, no one could tell.

Concealed weaponry was also a type of strategy in these mecha combat fights, so all mecha would typically have something up their sleeves.

Meanwhile, the silver mecha was a land-based humanoid mecha, extremely agile on land. On its back was a radiation gun, which was a specialised anti-aircraft weapon. In the mecha's right hand was a beam saber and its left hand was similarly empty on standby. All its other equipment were just like the red mecha's, standard regulation weapons.

The two mecha faced each other from a distance, both moving their limbs as they liked; they seemed to be warming up.

Right then, a strange scene suddenly occurred on the match grounds, causing Ling Lan to yell out in surprise.

On the field, the scenery suddenly changed — the normal floorboards swiftly turned into an endless desert. The audience was also whisked away from the stadium into the middle of this desert... Ling Lan could even feel the scorching heat of the sun on her body, as well as the limitless heat reflected by the sand beneath her feet.

Ling Lan quickly understood that this must be a type of simulation method, creating a realistic desert environment in an instant. Ling Lan still hadn't shaken herself out of the shock of finding herself in a desert when she was blindsided again. Apparently, the red winged transformer mecha had switched into aviation mode while the background was changing into this desert. Now, it was zooming off into the distance, directly becoming a small black dot before disappearing from sight completely. The silver mecha was equally fast — with a few great bounds, it had also disappeared into the dunes in the distance...

How was she supposed to watch the match if she couldn't see the mecha?

She asked Little Four, but Little Four was just as clueless. He quickly rushed to search for a solution, but just then, a cold voice abruptly rang out from beside her, almost scaring Ling Lan witless. "First time watching a match?"

Ling Lan turned her head. Sure enough, it was the mysterious man with his hidden eyes, ears, and nose who had spoken. Ling Lan was a little startled. She had obviously sensed that the other was very cold, so why would he take the initiative to speak to her?

Still, Ling Lan wasn't so foolish as to refuse someone who was willing to help. "Yes, it's my first time watching this kind of match."

"Focus and say 'selection' in your mind, a menu will appear," the man instructed Ling Lan.

Ling Lan did as he said, and a line of text appeared before her eyes: Please choose the viewing angle you want. 1: God View. 2: Challenger View. 3: Defender View.

Ling Lan didn't know which viewing angle was better, and so decided it would be wiser to ask an old hand at this. Thus, she unreservedly asked the man beside her, "Which viewing angle should I choose?"

"If you want to see an exciting match, choose God view. If you want to know how to operate a mecha or ways to counter, you can choose the other two options." The man was not as aloof and hard to get along with as Ling Lan had feared; he patiently responded to Ling Lan's question.

Ling Lan thought for a moment. She did not know how to operate mecha at all, so it would be a waste to watch from the other two perspectives. She might as well watch the two mechas fight — perhaps it would spark some inspiration for her own combat skills. Thus, she decisively chose God view.

"Thanks." Before making her selection, Ling Lan politely thanked the man beside her.

Chapter 110

Hide and Seek?

After giving her thanks, Ling Lan no longer paid any attention to the man or his response; all her focus was now on the mecha combat match about to begin. This caused the man beside her to throw a speechless glance at her — well, that was rather perfunctory. Shouldn't she be more sincere when thanking someone?!

Ling Lan was oblivious to the internal grumbles of the man beside her. After choosing God view, the image before her eyes shifted instantly, revealing two very different images. One image was focused on the red mecha, while the other showed that the silver mecha had already hidden itself underneath one of the sand dunes. The colour of the mecha was gradually changing to match the colour of the dune.

Ling Lan found this rather interesting, and put her attention on the silver mecha's image, silently saying in her mind to zoom out... Unthinkingly, she had stumbled upon the correct controls. The image zoomed out, showing that the hiding place of the silver mecha was completely invisible from a high bird's eye view.

Using the same method again, Ling Lan zoomed out the image of the red mecha as well. Only then did she find out that the red mecha was actually not that far away from the silver mecha — it was just that the red mecha had been circling around without getting close to the other's hiding spot. Now, the whereabouts of both mecha had been observed.

On the lower left corner of the image, there was a number counting down. Ling Lan guessed that this was probably the official start time of the match. The number was now already at 73, so the match would probably start about a minute or so later.

Moreover, Ling Lan also noticed that after she chose a viewing angle, it was as if she had entered a separate space. She couldn't feel the presence of anyone around her — it was as if she was the only one watching this battle, all disturbances screened away. Ling Lan was comfortable with this — at least that man with the dangerous presence would not be able to disrupt her from enjoying the mecha fight.

Meanwhile, on Little Four's end, not only did he search out all kinds of control systems

for mecha fighting games, he also looted all the information about other control systems that could be found within the virtual world. After he returned from his pillaging, Little Four told Ling Lan that this kind of low-level mistake would never happen ever again.

Little Four's mood was actually terrible right then. He had never expected that the virtual world would have a game directly implanted inside it, and that every game would have different control systems. This threw him, a virtual god, for a loop, causing him to lose face greatly in front of his boss this time. He still remembered how he had proudly proclaimed himself as the god of the virtual world to his boss once...

Who could have expected that there were things a god didn't know... it was such a slap in the face!

Ling Lan had no idea Little Four was tying himself up in knots over this; right now, she was patiently waiting for the countdown to reach zero. Finally, when the clock displayed a string of zeroes, the initially circling red mecha abruptly changed directions and flew straight towards the silver mecha's hiding spot. Ling Lan supposed that it was very likely that, to avoid wasting time with hide-and-seek, the system had directly informed the red mecha of its opponent's general position.

Ling Lan believed that, for fairness' sake, the system wouldn't give specific coordinates on the other's location to either side. Sure enough, the red mecha's subsequent actions proved this point. In the air, while still about 5 km away from the silver mecha's position, the red mecha suddenly launched a guided missile.

The moment the missile was fired, Ling Lan felt ripples pass through the image. Little Four jumped in with an immediate explanation, "This is a NNEMP¹ missile. It can disrupt the radar scanning of a mecha."

It looked like in order to make the audience feel the scene better, the system had added in these visual effects to represent these originally invisible interactions.

"What is the furthest distance that a mecha's radar scanning can reach?" asked Ling Lan thoughtfully.

"Depends on the mecha's radar model. A common mecha will typically be able to scan up to 2000 metres, an intermediate mecha up to 2500 metres, and an advanced mecha up to 3000 metres. Of course, there's still special-class mecha which can scan up to

4000 metres."

"Could the silver mecha be a special-class mecha?"

"At J8 level, it's very likely to possess a special-class mecha. But for a special-class mecha, not only must the mecha operator's operational skill be up to level, the operator must also have gathered a certain amount of meritorious exploits," explained Little Four to Ling Lan as he browsed through the information he had found.

Ling Lan nodded. Now she understood why the red mecha had fired the NNEMP missile from 5 km away. It was probably afraid the opponent was a special-class mecha, whose radar was capable of sensing 1000 metres further than his own mecha.

It was a reality that the red mecha couldn't afford to lose, so he couldn't gamble on this possibility.

The red mecha had just fired the NNEMP missile when it transformed into humanoid shape in mid-air and slowly descended to land on the ground. Next, the red mecha's colour slowly faded to match the colour of the desert.

"This is the 'chameleon system' only equipped on advanced mecha and beyond. It allows a mecha's external colour to change according to its environment." Little Four continued to clarify things for Ling Lan. Originally, all this information would be taught to Ling Lan in the scout academy before she turned 13; however, since Little Four had let Ling Lan come into contact with the virtual world and mecha fights prematurely, Little Four had no choice but to become the transmitter of knowledge.

A ring-shaped object slowly emerged from the shoulder area of the red mecha which had turned into the colour of the desert. Then, the object slowly and carefully snuck towards the position of the silver mecha.

"The ring-shaped object is an IE-type ²heat detector, the newest model on the market. It's considered a type of retrofit, not an original component of mecha. This model of heat detector can sense heat up to a distance of 1500 metres." Little Four was quick to react, introducing this new item that had appeared to Ling Lan immediately.

Ling Lan nodded silently. Even if the K8 mecha also had an IE-type heat detector equipped, the red mecha would not be disadvantaged. The two mechas had initially been set apart greatly by their long-range sensing capabilities, but with this move by the red mecha, the playing field had been levelled. Of course, if the other side didn't

have the newest heat detector equipped, this move would have given the red mecha the upper hand.

A well-timed and well-used NNEMP missile — it looked like the red mecha had come fully prepared for this cross-level challenge. It hadn't issued the challenge recklessly, and had come armed with meticulous strategy and tactics to handle the J8. It seemed like this match wouldn't be a quick one-sided battle; if the J8 wasn't careful, an upset might really be possible... Ling Lan felt her enthusiasm surge.

Ling Lan wanted to know how the silver mecha would react after facing the loss of its radar. She turned her attention to the silver mecha's side and was promptly shocked still by the other's decision. Apparently, when the silver mecha had seen its radar fizzle out, it had stopped to think. After about one minute, the operator chose to submerge the mecha's entire body into the sand dune and shut down the mecha. The scene truly became deathly silent.

This action naturally stunned Ling Lan. Even though Ling Lan didn't know much about mecha, she still knew that shutting down a mecha would also remove the defensive shield originally shielding the outside of the mecha. In other words, the defensive ability of the mecha currently would depend solely on the strength of the metal it was made of. If it was coincidentally shot by the opponent's laser gun, it would definitely take heavy damage.

Ling Lan knew very well that doing this on the battlefield was pretty much a suicidal act. However, in this one-on-one fight, it worked wonders. This move by the J8 mecha made the J6 mecha's heat detector become utterly useless. In other words, the J8's choice levelled the playing field once again. To discover the other, they could rely on nothing else but their eyes; no external force or gadget could be borrowed.

At this point, Ling Lan thought of another question. "The mecha is inactivated, losing its defences. Our human bodies naturally produce heat — won't that be picked up by the heat detector?"

Little Four answered, "Because the protective clothing that mecha operators wear have heat-shielding properties, so the heat detector won't be able to pick up their body heat."

Ling Lan understood now. No wonder the J8 mecha had chosen to shut down without any hesitation. He had this to fall back on.

The J6 mecha which had already changed colour to merge with the desert sand began to walk across the desert. Ling Lan thought that the weight of the mecha itself would make it very difficult for the mecha to move, but unexpectedly, the mecha walked on the sand as if it were normal flat ground, as if it took no extra effort whatsoever. She took a closer look at the mecha's feet, and found that only its sole would sink into the sand, as if its big and heavy body did not exist.

Could it be that this virtual world wasn't able to simulate realistic effects? Ling Lan was doubtful.

Little Four sensed Ling Lan's puzzlement, and hurried to clear it up. "It's not like that. These mecha come with their own levitation system, which can decrease the mecha's body weight. Here, the J6 mecha is still not being operated to its maximum capabilities. If a top-notch mecha operator were controlling it, its feet wouldn't sink at all into the yellow sand. Now that would truly be a display of walking on firm ground."

So that's how it was! Ling Lan felt as if she had become more knowledgeable. She found that things related to mecha couldn't be viewed through the lens of normal logic. Right now, her interest towards mecha was rising in a vertical line — the long-slumbering mecha dream of hers began to stir and flare up once more.

Goddammit, she really wished she owned a mecha right now! Ling Lan's heart throbbed with excitement and impatience.

"Boss, if you want mecha, please get over your fear of heights first!" whined Little Four with a pout. The main reason he still hadn't given Ling Lan any sort of mecha training till now was that Ling Lan was still afraid of heights.

Little Four's words caused even Ling Lan's thick-skinned face to turn red. Although her fear of heights had indeed gotten better under forceful training over this duration of time, she wasn't sure if she was really over it yet... and so, Ling Lan pretended not to have heard anything, looking away from Little Four's accusative stare. She turned her attention back to the images before her.

The red mecha carefully approached the silver mecha's position. However, all he knew was the other's general position and not the actual position, so when he found that the heat detector wasn't picking anything up, he stopped moving and began to consider what to do next. By now, the J6 mecha must have probably figured out that the heat detector was useless.

The J6 mecha seemed to become a little nervous now. Ling Lan saw that, with every step he took, he would look around warily. After many close brushes, he finally got closer and closer to the sand dune that the J8 was hiding in.

Who would discover the other first? The J8 was hidden within the sand dune, making it very difficult for the J6 to discover it. On the other hand, the J8 had shut down his mecha, and was in a blinded state. Both sides were not able to see the other — was this match destined to be a game of hide-and-seek from beginning to end?

Chapter 111

Calling Me Big Brother?

Right then, Ling Lan saw the J8 mecha move — some colour suddenly appeared on the entirely grey mecha.

"This is emergency activation. Now it all depends on what mecha it is. The emergency activation time of special-class mecha is between 4 to 7 seconds, while an advanced mecha's is between 7 to 9 seconds..." Little Four also began to feel a bit nervous; this would determine which mecha would gain the initiative.

For a heat detector to detect heat and relay its findings back to the mecha's cockpit, there would be a 2 second delay. From this point onwards, this mecha battle would become a match of fighting over time... to see which mecha could react faster, and which mecha operator could respond quicker.

Two seconds after the J8 activated, the J6 mecha found that a red heat spot had appeared on the screen connected to its heat detector. The J6 mecha, whose back was to the red spot, spun on one leg to turn around swiftly, and aimed precisely at the coordinate position indicated by the flashing red dot. But there was nothing there...

Even so, the J6 mecha did not hesitate. It swiftly pressed down on the trigger of the laser beam gun in its hands. Energy from a clip of the gun's energy storage unit was converted into beam rays, and the rays shot out in a torrent towards the sand dune before the mecha. This round of intense firepower actually turned the dune into a pit in an instant, but there were no mecha remains to be found inside. Besides yellow sand, there was just more yellow sand.

"Emergency activation 5.537 seconds. That J8 mecha is most certainly a special-class mecha. Its luck isn't bad, managing to finish activation within 6 seconds," remarked Little Four. If the mecha had finished activating just half a second slower, it would have been impossible for the J8 mecha to evade the J6 mecha's beam gun attack.

"Not good!" The J6 mecha, which had been attacking the dune, abruptly leapt into the air. In mid-air, it pointed the laser gun in its hands straight down towards the ground below it and pulled the trigger, sending a wave of energy pouring out once more.

At the same time, a beam saber shot out from the sand, heading straight for the J6, while a sturdy beam shield emerged to block off the J6's beam attacks.

Seeing that its beam gun attacks wouldn't be able to fend off the other, the wings on the J6's back spread open to reveal six high-efficiency guided missiles and fired them immediately.

The J8 mecha had intended to pierce the J6 mecha with its saber, but seeing the six missiles headed towards it, it knew that it wouldn't be able to hold them off with just a beam shield.

It quickly reversed directions in mid-air, and under the combined screeching of the mecha's thrusters, it forcefully pushed its own large frame several hundred metres away from the missile's trajectory. At the same time, the mecha's arms crossed behind it, and the J8 took out a beam laser cannon in an instant, keeping away its beam saber on its back.

The mecha lifted the laser cannon with a strong left arm and steadied it with its right hand. It turned to face the six guided missiles coming after it, and the operator decisively pulled the trigger. An immense surge of energy spewed out from the mouth of the cannon, rushing up into the sky.

When this energy surge made contact with the missiles, the missiles were blown up one after another. These consecutive explosions shook Ling Lan's entire body violently, making her feel as if she were really on a battlefield.

The J8 mecha had finally wiped out the six threatening guided missiles, but the J6 had also regained the attacking initiative. It flew up high into the air, aiming its laser beam gun at the J8 on the ground and fired once more.

Meanwhile, the J8 had no means to retaliate at the moment, and could only scurry all over the ground to dodge the J6's attacks. However, Ling Lan didn't think the J6 had the upper hand — instead, she felt that the J8 was already slowly reclaiming the initiative in this match.

This was because Ling Lan could see very clearly that the J8's steps had never become disorganised. It was obviously using the most widespread and most adaptable footwork — split steps.

Although the J8 looked like it was being forced to flee helter-skelter like a mouse, every

step it took was calculated to be on the most advantageous position, neutralizing every attack from the J6 in the air.

The J6 seemed to also have figured out that it wouldn't be able to hit its opponent just by relying on its laser beam gun. It lifted its wings once more, and a new round of high-efficiency guided missiles were launched. The six new missiles descended upon the J8 mecha below in a horizontal line.

The J8 mecha didn't choose to retreat. It lifted its laser cannon again, and this time, it fired three laser beams simultaneously.

What was surprising was that the three shots were timed in such a way that they also created a horizontal line, flying forwards to meet the six missiles head-on.

When the first missile was set off, the following two missiles exploded as well. The concussive force from the explosion of the three missiles and the laser beams then set off the remaining three missiles. Once again, the J6's attacks were a bust. Besides that, due to the violent tremors from the explosion, yellow sand filled the air, obscuring the vision of the J6, preventing him from seeing what was happening below...

Without thinking about it, the J6 shot downwards desperately with the beam gun in his hand. In the meantime, he was anxiously looking over the indicators from his heat detector, worried that the opponent would take advantage of his momentary loss of vision to fire its laser cannon.

Right then, he suddenly noticed a beam of light shooting towards his lower belly without a sound. This attack came too swiftly — he had no time at all to defend; the body of his mecha was already out of time to dodge the attack.

Quicker than words could say, the J6 decisively threw the laser beam gun in its hand onto the coming light beam. There was a loud 'boom' as the two collided and the J6's laser gun was utterly destroyed by the beam. Still, the J6 was thrown back by the resulting force, away from the path of the light ray, narrowly avoiding the fate of being pierced clean through the stomach. (That area was where the cockpit was. If it were hit, even if the operator didn't die, he would still lose control of the mecha. Either way, the J6 would have lost.)

It was then when everyone could finally see what was happening. It turned out that after swathes of yellow sand had been blown into the air, and while visibility was poor,

the J8 mecha had sprung upwards and, working with the power of its thrusters, it had flown up into the air in a split second. It had gotten close to the J6, and then, the J8 had purposefully discarded its laser cannon in favour of stabbing its beam saber at the J6.

A laser cannon shot produced heat, which would have been captured by the mecha's defensive systems, taking out the element of surprise from its attack. Thus, the J8 had chosen to use its beam saber, which was formed from cold light, because it was undetectable.

However, the J6 had reacted extremely quickly. It had sensed danger within that split second and decisively surrendered its weapon in exchange for a chance at survival.

Still, having lost its beam gun, the J6 could only fight with the J8 in melee combat. The moment they clashed, Ling Lan knew that the J6 mecha was definitely going to lose. In terms of combat instinct, the J6 was clearly weaker than the J8; they were on completely different levels.

Of course, the other audience members did not have Ling Lan's vision and couldn't tell. After all, the two mecha were both fighting passionately, no clear winner or loser between the two of them. The fight looked like it was neck-and-neck, extremely exciting. The reason why Ling Lan could tell at a glance was completely due to her innate talent —— Profound Insight. From the very beginning, she had identified the J6's weakness, and had also noticed that the J8 was not yet fighting with its full strength.

Thus, Ling Lan knew that the difference between the J6's and J8's melee combat skills were actually very large. As expected, a cross-level challenge was not that easy.

She lowered her head and sighed, choosing to withdraw. A mecha fight was actually not that much different from a real physical fight. With just a glance, Ling Lan could tell that quite a few of the moves had been inspired and based off of real physical combat. It was just that these moves were much swifter and more incisive in real combat, while they looked obviously clumsier when executed with mecha.

Ling Lan had just withdrawn from the scene of the fight when she sensed something strange. The entire battle stadium was eerily silent and still. Everyone was sitting in their seats, unmoving — it looked like their attention had been completely captivated by the game fight in the other space.

Still, she was a little creeped out by the stillness of the silent scene. She couldn't help but twist her neck around, just moving a little to prove that she was still a living person.

"You didn't watch till the end?" The man beside her suddenly spoke up. Caught unprepared, Ling Lan was almost scared witless. Still, Ling Lan was still Ling Lan after all — after going through the insane torments of the learning space for so long, Ling Lan's little heart was unbelievably strong.

"Yes, aren't you doing the same?" asked Ling Lan reflexively after collecting her wits.

"The J6 is losing for sure. What else is there to see?" The man didn't seem to be in a good mood.

"You chose the J6's viewing angle?" asked Ling Lan, tone almost certain.

"I had wanted to see how a weaker person would be able to beat a stronger opponent... unfortunately, that J6 wasted his own advantage." The man seemed to have a lot to complain about the J6's performance.

"What advantage did the J6 have?" His combat instinct was obviously off, so Ling Lan really couldn't think of a way the J6 could win.

"That J6 is a famous marksman, but unfortunately, he didn't show any of that skill in this match," said the man regretfully. It looked like he was very familiar with the J6's skills.

"Marksman? With beam shields, there shouldn't be much a marksman can do though. Right?" Ling Lan was recalling how the J8 mecha's beam shield had pretty much withstood the power of the laser gun.

"The J6 should have chosen to snipe. Melee combat is the J8's specialty." The man knew both combatants well.

Ling Lan thought back to the attack when she had first started school — it had been so troublesome to be targeted by snipers — and nodded in agreement.

Sniping was the best ambush, impossible to guard against absolutely. After all, a beam shield could only protect a specific spot and not the entire body. Moreover, sniping was undetectable. If the J6 had chosen to snipe from the very beginning, the outcome of

this match might have been harder to tell.

Seeing Ling Lan agree with his opinion, the man's mood took a turn for the better. "But an upset is still a very difficult thing after all. Even if the J6 had scraped a win in this match, he would still lose the next match. The outcome would not change."

Ling Lan understood what the man meant. If the J6 had sniped his way to victory in this match, his opponent in the next match would definitely be prepared with anti-sniping gear. In other words, the J6's sniping advantage would only be effective once, in the end, he would still have to rely on his own physical skills to pass.

"Perhaps the J6 understood this, and so decided to try a ranged attack where both sides could see one another. I think that if he won two times in a row, he would definitely use his trump, sniping, in the third match." commented Ling Lan, putting herself in the J6's shoes. If it were her, she also wouldn't have used her pocket ace right at the start and let the opponents figure out a counterstrategy.

The man was silent, a little taken aback, before he made a low noise of agreement. Yet, Ling Lan could clearly sense that the other's mood had gotten worse somehow...

This wasn't looking good. If the other's emotions became so terrible that he lost control, wouldn't she be in danger? Ling Lan had not forgotten that the other was a spiritual mutant turned spectre that was capable of killing her consciousness.

"I have to go now. Bye, Big Brother!" That should be right, right? Even though she couldn't see his face clearly, just based off that lower jaw and those upturned lips, the man was clearly an adult...

"Ah? Big brother?! Uh, goodbye!" The man seemed to be rather taken aback by Ling Lan's address, pausing for a beat before responding.

Ling Lan did not notice this; she was anxious to get as far away as she could from this dangerous man. After she heard him say goodbye, she hurriedly walked off, quickly leaving the man behind as she distanced herself from the mecha battle stadium.

The man muttered moodily to himself, "Could it be that I really look that old now? Calling me big brother?..." In a dark mood, he chose to exit from the battle stadium and then left the virtual world.

Chapter 112

Mecha Training Hall

In a private manor on planet Azure, an old man was staring anxiously at a closed login pod to the virtual world. Soon, he saw the lights inside the login pod turn off and the pod's door suddenly opened. An androgynous, pretty child of about eleven or twelve years old was lying inside the pod. His face was pale and his entire body was currently drenched with sweat, as if he had been through some strenuous exercise.

After several seconds, the child slowly opened his eyes. Seeing the old man before him, he smiled weakly and said, "Major-domo, why are you waiting here?"

"Are you still planning to fool me? Young Master, your body is not well. Didn't your grandfather tell you not to go online?" The major-domo's eyes held a trace of remonstration, but was mostly heartache.

The pretty child continued to smile and said, "No matter what, I still have to go online a few times. Otherwise, I won't be able to keep up with the pace of studies at school."

The major-domo held back and said nothing more; he could not tell his young master not to study after all... he could only walk up to lift his young master out of the login pod, and put him into the prepped recovery pod at the side to rest.

Looking at the sleeping figure of the lovely child before him, the major-domo heaved a heavy sigh. His heart was filled with affection and heartache for the child — it wasn't that easy to be the first in line to inherit... the young master excelled in every way, but his physical body was just too weak. His spiritual self mutation was just too much of a burden on the body.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan, celebrating for finally leaving the dangerous person behind, continued to browse the streets of the capital. It had taken so much trouble to come out this once — she should make full use of the chance and see her fill. Unknowingly, she found herself on yet another mecha street. This mecha street wasn't made up of mecha stores selling toys and figurines like those in the Central Scout Academy, but

actually had stores selling real mecha, the strongest weapons of the Federation.

Ling Lan took a cursory look as she walked down the street, and then chose to enter the Anji¹ mecha store at random.

The moment Ling Lan entered the store, she saw several shop assistants chatting behind the store counter. The men and women were about to come forward to offer their assistance, but seeing Ling Lan walk in on her own, they stopped.

Little Four pouted and complained, "*Not coming forward to serve us... do they think we have no money?*"

In contrast, Ling Lan wasn't too surprised. "*My current appearance is that of a 16 year old, with no accompanying guardian. Would you think that I'd be able to afford mecha? It's perfectly normal for them to ignore us. Besides, without them following us around, won't it be easier to browse as we like? Even more fun?*"

Little Four seemed to come to a realisation, "*That's true! But I must still make sure they know in the future that Boss is a wealthy person. Buying the best mecha here is not a problem!*" Little Four's expression was proud and cocky.

Ling Lan's glanced at him. "*Looks like you've earned quite a bit in the virtual world?*"

"It's alright, not that much, probably about several hundred thousand billion." This world may be lacking in some things, but it was certainly not lacking in people, especially bored people. He had just randomly posted several novels online, and they were now all doing very well. Just the 'monetary awards' from fans alone had contributed several hundred billion to Little Four's account.

Ling Lan smiled and said, "*Good job. Keep up the good work.*"

Receiving Ling Lan's praise, Little Four was extremely happy. He was even happier over this than when he had 'conquered' this virtual world. In his heart, he was more determined than ever to get all the Federation's money into his wallet.

Let us give a round of applause for Little Four's grand goal... and let us wonder when Little Four will find out that the Federation's money will never ever run out.

Right then, from among the shop assistants, a cheerful young man stepped out voluntarily. He approached Ling Lan and greeted her politely, "Hello, I'm assistant 017

of Anji Mecha Store. May I know if you require any assistance?"

"Thank you, but I'm just looking around." Ling Lan was a bit startled, but she demurely refused 017's offer of service.

When Assistant 017 heard Ling Lan's response, he did not reveal any sign of disappointment. He just continued to smile brightly and said, "Customer, this should be your first time getting close to mecha, right?"

This customer with eyes full of curiosity — this should be the first time she is stepping into a mecha store. This scene made him recall his nervous excitement the first time he himself stepped into a mecha store. Back then, he had not known where to start and had really hoped someone would help him out; perhaps this girl would also require some guidance like him did... it was this feeling that made 017 ignore the other shop assistants' jeering and come over voluntarily.

Ling Lan nodded firmly in answer to his question, for this was the truth.

Assistant 017 smiled at this and indicated for Ling Lan to walk with him. He then brought Ling Lan to a section filled with basic mecha — this area was a place suitable for novices to purchase mecha. Inside was various models of basic mecha, totalling about ten different types.

Ling Lan took a quick look and couldn't help but frown. These ten or so mecha all had differing shapes, but could overall be split into three categories. One category was bestial mecha, another was avian mecha, and the remaining category was the most commonly seen humanoid mecha.

The reason Ling Lan was frowning was that these mecha models were much cruder than the two mecha she had seen at the mecha battle stadium. Whether it was in terms of colouring, form, or even in terms of weaponry and equipment, these mecha here were completely incomparable. If the two mecha she had seen at the mecha battle stadium were considered adults, then these mecha here were undoubtedly toddler-level. This made Ling Lan feel rather disappointed.

Ling Lan's displeasure was clearly seen by assistant 017, but he wasn't at all surprised by this.

He explained kindly, "Customer, all the mecha in our Federation are actually variations evolved from these three categories of basic mecha. If you want to become an

outstanding mecha operator, you'll need to master the controls of these three types of basic mecha. If you do this, no matter what type of advanced mecha you try to operate in the future, you'll be able to pick it up quickly."

Hearing this, Ling Lan was moved; she packed away her initial scorn. She would never forget the importance of basics — both the learning space and her father Ling Xiao had strongly emphasised the importance of basics — it played a large role in determining the final outcome of an individual's personal growth.

A warning flag rose up in Ling Lan's heart; she couldn't believe that she had actually made the low-level mistake of judging by appearances. It looked like the previous period of smooth sailing had made her forget to be humble and cautious, and actually become as arrogant as Yelang ².

Ling Lan's shift in attitude made Assistant 017 nod internally, his impression of her becoming even better. He continued to say, "Actually, I don't recommend you to buy a mecha right now. In fact, the virtual world has mecha training halls that specialize in teaching the controls of the basic mecha. Customer, you can first go there to learn more."

Ling Lan thanked Assistant 017. If it weren't for his help, she wouldn't have known that the virtual world had these things. After she asked Assistant 017 how to get to a mecha training hall, she left the Anji Mecha Store.

Assistant 017 sent Ling Lan off with a smile, and returned to the counter. He was welcomed back by the scornful jeers of the other shop assistants.

"Wasted your energy, didn't you? I told you that that girl had no money..."

"At that age with no guardian along, she was definitely just here to look around. She would never have bought something as expensive as a mecha. 017, you just wouldn't believe it and still wanted to go forward. See, you've got nothing to show for it..."

"Even if you wanted to gain more sales to earn a higher commission, you still need to find the right targets."

Assistant 017 did not get angry, only replying with a smile, "I wasn't doing it for sales. I just felt that she naturally belonged with mecha."

Assistant 017's words caused the other shop assistants to burst out into

uncontrollable laughter, all of them mocking him and asking him when he had become a fortune teller. Mind you, girls, due to biological reasons, very very rarely advanced to become high-level mecha operators. So, among the millions and millions of mecha operators in the Federation, just having a thousand female mecha operators was already considered a lot.

017 was unperturbed by the mass mocking, only smiling and shaking his head in response. This carefree attitude of his soon sapped the interest of the others in mocking him, and they all left to do their own things.

All of them did not know what 017 was thinking — the closer he got to that girl, the more he had sensed it — the future of that girl on the path of mecha was boundless... 017 smiled again. "It's also a good thing to build up some good karma..."

Very quickly, Ling Lan had found the mecha training hall. The moment she neared the entrance, a line of text appeared before her eyes. *"Do you want to formally enter mecha combat?"*

"Oh... so this here is also a mecha fighting game!" Little Four exclaimed when he saw these words.

Ling Lan understood then that the mecha training was most likely connected to the mecha fighting game. Ling Lan would naturally have to join the game, or else how would she be able to learn and train in the mecha controls?

The moment Ling Lan made her choice, she was transported straight into a large hall. Inside, there stood a handsome soldier, and there were three hulking basic mecha standing beside him.

Ling Lan walked to stand before the soldier, but before she could say anything, the soldier asked, "Recruit, do you want to first understand more about the combat styles of the three mecha, their controls, or do you just want to choose a mecha directly?"

Ling Lan was a cautious person — she did not understand much about mecha yet, so she of course chose to first learn more about the three mecha's combat styles and controls.

Very quickly, two images appeared before Ling Lan. One of the panels was playing a

video of the movements of the mecha from the outside, while the other panel showed the movements of the mecha operator inside the cockpit which caused that movement.

Ling Lan saw a pair of hands flying rapidly within the cockpit, and following the motions, the mecha in the other panel made a reactionary movement. For just one basic movement, the fingers in the cockpit had to make over 10 motions.

For instance, just taking one step involved the mecha's pelvis, knee, ankle, balance, as well as the energy distribution between its two legs. Ling Lan had counted, and just such a simple movement required 18 control motions from the cockpit in an instant — and this was still considered an easy movement.

"It's very challenging, actually being all manually controlled. There's a lot of pressure on hand speed." Ling Lan was very surprised. She had always thought that operating a mecha was just like driving, with a control stick or something similar.

"Aren't these things what Daddy has been teaching? If it weren't for the fact that Boss you were having trouble with it, we wouldn't have come out to sightsee. I wonder if you mix your training with operating a mecha, would the effect be better. If we could just break past Boss's bottleneck in one go, that'd be great," suggested Little Four.

By now, Little Four was already calling Ling Xiao 'daddy'. This was because Ling Lan had once heard Little Four say Boss's daddy something something blah blah blah... and felt that it sounded somewhat awkward. Besides, she had always considered Little Four, who had travelled along with her to this future, as her little brother, so she decided to just ask Little Four to call Ling Xiao 'daddy' alongside her.

Chapter 113

Rabbit Mecha?

Perhaps the learning space had tweaked Ling Lan to become more boyish in personality, for her interest towards mecha was at an unprecedented high. She not only looked over the controls of all three basic mecha, but also eyed all the basic mecha models greedily. She found that she really liked every single type of mecha she saw, so much so that she really wished that she could own all of them.

Sensing Ling Lan's greed, the soldier told Ling Lan steadily that all recruits were only allowed to choose one mecha to start. If she wanted to own more, she would have to rely on her own efforts to earn more points to redeem new mecha...

The soldier's words caused Ling Lan to calm down instantly. She began to consider which type of mecha she should choose as her initiate mecha. Ling Lan was a little uneasy, afraid that she would choose wrongly.

Still, Ling Lan was a good child — she just loved to ask questions, a habit trained up in the learning space. So, she asked the soldier — as a beginner, which mecha was best suited for her?

In fact, the first person Ling Lan asked was Little Four, but unfortunately, Little Four also didn't know which of the three mecha before them was best or most appropriate for her. His familiarity with this world's mecha was not much better than Ling Lan's.

Ling Lan had no choice but to go to her second option and ask the soldier. Unexpectedly, Ling Lan really struck the nail on the head — the game's system had indeed arranged it so that the soldier would be able to answer this type of question. When the soldier heard Ling Lan's question, he gave a straight answer. "The mecha with the easiest controls, which are the easiest for beginners to learn, is the bestial mecha. I recommend you begin training from bestial mecha."

Since the soldier who was familiar with mecha had already said so, it shouldn't be wrong. Ling Lan immediately selected the bestial mecha without any hesitation. She had barely spoken when with a wave of the soldier's hand, a large spin wheel appeared abruptly before Ling Lan.

On the spin wheel, Ling Lan could see countless images of bestial mecha. There was a ferocious cheetah and lion, and an ugly spider and giant ant, and of course, right in the middle of the wheel was a large compass needle pointing at those images of bestial mecha.

"What is this?" Ling Lan stared at it all blankly. Then, shocked realisation stole over her face. "Could it be that obtaining a mecha also depends on luck?"

"A beginner's mecha is gifted by the system. So, a beginner has no right to choose the mecha. Which mecha model they get will be determined randomly by this spin wheel," explained the soldier. "Luck, is also a form of strength. You should anticipate your luck and hope it brings you a strong and powerful mecha!"

In Ling Lan's eyes, the soldier's current smile was filled with schadenfreude. Ling Lan didn't know what the other beginners felt during their first time here, but Ling Lan's teeth were currently aching from holding back her irritation. She really wished she could just send a punch flying, and blow that despicable smile off the other's face...

Of course, Ling Lan could only think about it and not actually do it. After all, she still had to rely on the other to get her mecha. Ling Lan spun the spin wheel forcefully. The spin wheel spun frenetically, and then gradually slowed down as time went by. Finally, it got slower and slower, and just as it was about to stop on a panther-type mecha, the needle jumped unexpectedly.

Ling Lan hadn't even managed to take a good look at which mecha model the needle was pointing at when with a 'pop', confetti swirled through the air. Then, an extremely cute giant rabbit abruptly appeared before her.

Ling Lan was gobsmacked... a rabbit? Why a rabbit?! Even an ugly spider or ant would be more fearsome than a rabbit!

With some difficulty, Ling Lan calmed herself down. Then, she saw the weapon in the rabbit's hands, and Ling Lan found herself utterly lost for words... Dammit, this nonsense system! You're really shameless! Actually equipping a rabbit mecha with a carrot — do you really think this rabbit here is a real rabbit?!

Within the mind-space, however, Little Four had stars in his eyes. With his hands framing his face, he wriggled his butt and shouted, "*Boss, this mecha is so pretty and cute! I like it!*"

When the soldier saw the rabbit mecha appear, the smile on his face grew even wider. "Congratulations, recruit, on obtaining our Federation's newest rabbit mecha model." That said, he reached out a hand to pass a white item that resembled a remote control to Ling Lan.

Ling Lan took the item; it was obvious that this was the activation key of the rabbit mecha. She said sullenly, "If you don't congratulate me, I think I might be happier."

The soldier seemed oblivious to Ling Lan's sour mood. His expression suddenly turned grim, and he issued a command, "In that case, recruit, get into your mecha immediately. We'll begin training in the basic controls now."

"Yes!" Ling Lan stood at attention to receive the order, and then pressed a button on the remote key. The door to the cockpit on the belly of the rabbit mecha swung open. Ling Lan leapt up in one big stride, and then with several consecutive hops, she smoothly made her way into the cockpit. Lying down, she pressed the button once again and the cockpit door closed, turning the rabbit into a whole rabbit once again.

Ling Lan had just finished doing this when the soldier waved his hand, and the rabbit mecha with Ling Lan inside it disappeared from this login point. They reappeared in a room specially for training the basic movements, such as jumping and running.

At this moment, Ling Lan chose to activate the mecha. Of course, she chose regular activation — after approximately 3 minutes, the rabbit mecha completed its activation.

Just as Ling Lan was about to turn on all the screens, she noticed that a line of text had appeared on the main screen before her eyes. *"Basic control instructions for the rabbit mecha..."*

Following these instructions, Ling Lan finally understood the functions of the buttons before her. She had initially thought there was no control stick, but in fact, there was. It's just that the control stick was located among a sea of buttons. Back when Ling Lan had been watching the demo operations, because she had been dazzled by the hand speed, she hadn't noticed it. As those fingers had flown over the control panel, the control stick was actually the item that was used most frequently.

"Who knew mecha controls are actually this complicated? In the past, when I watched the mecha fights, I thought it would be as simple as physical combat... looks like I've

underestimated mecha operators after all." Just trying to understand and remember the array of buttons before her, Ling Lan felt the onset of a minor headache.

"Relax, Boss. As long as the mecha's A.I. is evolved, it won't be as complicated to operate anymore." Little Four had been looking over the mecha's A.I. closely, considering how he could improve it to help his boss save some energy.

But Ling Lan stopped Little Four, saying, "Little Four, don't improve the mecha's A.I..."

Little Four was puzzled, "Why not?"

"I came here to learn, so I should do it like the other children and start from the basics. The instructors in the learning space and my dad all repeatedly stress the importance of the basics — I cannot just avoid them because I'm afraid of trouble," explained Ling Lan. "Besides, this is the virtual world. Not only is there systemic monitoring, there are also those dangerous figures with mutated spiritual selves. No one knows whether this area is being monitored; I don't wish for you to be in any danger."

Ling Lan's concerned words made Little Four unable to protest, so he could only nod obediently and promise not to do anything to help Ling Lan with this. However, as a result, Little Four wasn't in a very good mood, because he found that the areas where he could help his boss were really just too few.

Seeing this, Ling Lan quickly changed the topic. "Little Four, what do you think was the mecha type our dad used when he first started learning? If it was a bestial type, was the mecha he received also very silly?" The more Ling Lan talked about it, the more curious she was.

As expected, Little Four's attention was pulled away by Ling Lan, and he found he had something new to do. Excitedly, he told Ling Lan to wait for a moment, and he then scampered off to collect all the information he could find on Ling Xiao.

Although Ling Xiao's data was labelled as S-class, who was Little Four? He was a virtual god! There wasn't anything that couldn't be done as long as he wanted to do it — previously, it was just that he hadn't thought to collect Ling Xiao's data, which was why he didn't have any on him right now. But now that Boss had indicated interest, as his boss's follower, he would definitely satisfy his boss's curiosity.

Very quickly, Little Four returned. Face filled with excitement, he said, "Boss, Boss, do you know who our daddy is? Oh wow, he's just too incredible!"

Ling Lan's curiosity was instantly ignited by Little Four. After some thought, she said, "Dad's military rank is major general... could it be that he's a special-class mecha operator?" Ling Lan vaguely remembered that Little Four had mentioned special-class mecha before; the associated operator rank should be special-class mecha operator, right?

Little Four shook a finger as he said proudly, "Nope! Mecha operators are not categorised that way." Following that, Little Four gave a breakdown on the levels of mecha operators in this world.

"Mecha operators are also called mecha warrior-masters. From the name alone, you can tell that there are two titles included. One is mecha warrior, while the other is mecha master. Operators of advanced mecha and below (inclusive of advanced mecha themselves), are collectively called mecha warriors, while those who operate special-class mecha and above are called mecha masters.

"Mecha warriors, are then further divided into trainee mecha warriors, junior mecha warriors, intermediate mecha warriors, and advanced mecha warriors. The corresponding mecha they pilot are trainee mecha, junior mecha, intermediate mecha, and advanced mecha.

"Meanwhile, mecha masters are divided into special-class mecha masters, ace mecha masters, imperial mecha masters, and god-class mecha masters. Special-class mecha masters and ace mecha masters both pilot special-class mecha, though an ace mecha master would have a higher level of control over their mecha. Imperial mecha masters pilot imperial mecha, while god-class mecha masters naturally operate the Federation's ultimate weapons, god-class mecha¹.

"But this is just the military's internal categorization. For the public, the distinctions are not that discrete. All the mecha warriors and mecha masters are just called mecha operators.

"Generally speaking, imperial operators and above will not be deployed in cases of war. This is because these type of mecha operators are beings that can decide the outcome of a war. As such, each country has agreements binding them, which will not be broken unless under special circumstances.

"God-class operators are an even more fearsome and threatening existence. The Federation can possess such a vast expanse of land and distant boundaries all because

the Federation has the highest number of god-class operators among the neighbouring countries...

"Boss, now take a guess. Which level of operator does our dad belong to?" Little Four's brows and eyes were all scrunched up in a line from his exuberant smile; it was clear that he was in an excellent mood.

"Seeing you so happy, our dad must be pretty well ranked. Could it be that he had already become an ace operator?" Ling Lan thought back to her dad in the legacy mission — he was so unbelievably young; if he had really managed to achieve ace operator status, he would definitely already be among the best and brightest.

"No, no, no, that's wrong, that's wrong." Little Four glared at Ling Lan with contempt, somewhat miffed at Ling Lan for underestimating their dad...

Chapter 114

God-Class Operator Ling Xiao!

Ling Lan was shocked, "Could it be that our dad had already reached imperial level?" Heavens, their old man was just too abnormal!

Little Four's expression was sullen. Couldn't Boss take a more adventurous guess?!

The moody Little Four did not answer Ling Lan directly, but merely read the contents of a military report he had found to her. "The Federation originally had 12 god-class operators, but 8 years ago, they unexpectedly lost one of them, the youngest god-class operator of the Federation. That god-class operator had lost his life in a death tunnel on the evening of the day he was deployed to the enemy nation..."

8 years ago? Death tunnel? What a coincidence — dying on the same year and the same place as her old man... Ling Lan's brows furrowed. Little Four wouldn't have brought up unrelated things in their conversation; could it be that this had something to do with her dad?

Before Ling Lan could figure it out, Little Four tacked on a sentence that made Ling Lan blank out. "The mecha of that god-class operator, is named <Belief>!"

After a long while, Ling Lan asked shakily, "You're saying that... that god-class operator is Ling Xiao?"

Little Four nodded. "Yes, the only person to have advanced to god-class operator status in the Federation in the last 10 years, also the youngest ever in history to achieve that status — this person is Ling Xiao."

"Lies!" yelled Ling Lan suddenly.

Little Four was taken aback. He had not expected that Ling Lan's reaction would be so dramatic, even outright rejecting this news.

"If he really were a god-class operator, then how could he have been deployed? Didn't you say that, imperial levels and above were not allowed to be deployed randomly?"

Plus, aren't god-class mecha the Federation's ultimate weapons? Such a formidable weapon — how could the person who controlled one die so easily?"

Seated within the rabbit mecha, Ling Lan involuntarily clenched her fists tightly. If Ling Xiao had been weaker, Ling Lan could still have accepted him dying just like that. But the Ling Xiao being described by Little Four was just too strong. Such a powerful man dying so simply — she just found it a little hilarious and unbelievable.

"According to the top-secret files I found within the military, our dad only used 6 years to ascend from ace operator to god-class operator status. Successfully advancing to imperial operator status in Star Calendar Year 4725, then successfully advancing to god-class operator status in Star Calendar Year 4728. However, from the moment dad became an imperial operator, this information had been sealed by the military. Around that time, the military probably already had plans to hide dad's real status and deploy him to fight the enemy nation.

"So, that year when dad was deployed, he did so under the identity of an ace operator. This was also why dad only had the military rank of major general. If he had gone as a god-class operator, he would at least have gotten the military rank of general." Little Four's tone was regretful. If Ling Xiao had passed away with the rank of general, the resources Ling Lan inherited would have been much more substantial.

The innocent and simple-minded Little Four didn't consider the fact that if things really panned out as he thought, the people who would set their eyes on those resources wouldn't just be the small Ling elite family. It was highly likely that greater forces would be drawn as well; at that point, Ling Lan may very well have lost the right to inherit completely.

Little Four's regrets only lasted for a moment. He moved on to say, "The Federation was initially planning to pull a fast one by deploying Ling Xiao into battle, hoping to uproot our historical enemy, the Twilight Empire, in one stroke. However, for some unknown reason, the upper ranks of the military sent down the order for Ling Xiao to lead a fleet through the death tunnel to sneak behind the enemy nation, in preparation for a pincer attack... unexpectedly, the fleet encountered violent energy turbulence from deep within the death tunnel and lost their lives."

"It's really so coincidental!" At this moment, a trace of an ice-cold smile hung on Ling Lan's lips, causing chills to run through Little Four's heart. It turned out that, subconsciously, Ling Lan had begun to emit the killing intent she had amassed in the

learning space.

"Yup, it's so coincidental that it's suspicious. In fact, there was indeed something wrong with the military command, and the energy turbulence within the death tunnel wasn't formed naturally as well." Little Four centred himself and continued to tell Ling Lan what he had found.

Little Four's searching capabilities were undoubtedly powerful, proving that he was truly the virtual god he claimed to be. Of course, Little Four was also putting in so much effort because Ling Xiao was now his daddy as well. He had to find out all he could about his daddy so that if anyone asked him about it in future, he would be able to give a proper answer. Still, he had not expected that this serious search of his would actually turn up some problems.

"Looks like, this was a plot targeting my dad." Ling Lan fully believed in Little Four's abilities. If Little Four said there was a problem, then there must certainly be a problem. Moreover, Ling Lan too had thought from the start that all these coincidences stacking up together was unlikely to truly be coincidence.

"Yes, I can confirm that, our daddy really did die from a sinister plot," said Little Four decisively. "Originally, the complete annihilation of Ling Xiao's fleet had struck a heavy blow on the morale of the Federation. However, the military acted quickly. They immediately announced Ling Xiao's status as a god-class operator, along with the reason for his death. They claimed that he was killed by a plot of the Twilight Empire — this caused the fighting between the Federation and the Twilight Empire to escalate immediately, until it truly reached the point where there wouldn't be peace till one side was defeated. Now, the fighting has been going on for 8 years, and there are still no signs of stopping. There have already been countless deaths and injuries of the military on both sides."

Ling Lan was rather surprised. "Why would dad's death cause such an outcome?"

Little Four sighed, "Boss, you don't understand the position god-class operators have within the hearts of the Federation soldiers. God-class operators are like gods to military staff, and Ling Xiao was the youngest one. His victories spurred the excitement of all the soldiers — it could be said that Ling Xiao was the idol of the entire military. Also, because Ling Xiao was the youngest of the god-class operators, he had much more potential and room to grow than the other god-class operators. It was almost certain that he would have become the guardian deity of the Federation for the

next forty to fifty years.

"Think about it. Their guardian deity was sacrificed to an underhanded plot of the enemy nation — how could the soldiers of the Federation just let it rest? So they could only continue to fight endlessly until one of the countries no longer has the ability to fight."

Listening till this point, Ling Lan descended into deep thought. She recalled how when others had fought over her right to inherit, the military had chosen to just stand by and watch. Then she thought about when she was ambushed on her way to school. And then, there was her father's legacy mission — he had set up so many obstacles and tricks, just so he could narrow down the selection and find her... she felt like she understood things a bit better now. The people within the upper ranks of the military who had caused Ling Xiao's death had not loosened their monitoring of the Ling family; it seemed that they did not want to see anyone from the Ling family appear in the military world.

"Little Four, looks like we need to find the people in the upper ranks of the military who killed my dad," said Ling Lan with an icy smile.

"Ah? Why?" Little Four didn't understand.

"For one, Ling Xiao's blood flows within this body of mine, and I am also learning from Ling Xiao's legacy. Whether it's a life debt, or a mentorship debt, I need to avenge Ling Xiao. I cannot just allow him to die senselessly."

"Secondly, in these 8 years, I believe the other has been monitoring us all this while. The moment we stand out a little in the military world, the other will definitely not hesitate to kill us off. I don't wish to live with this hidden knife hanging over our heads."

Ling Lan's words drew Little Four's bitter anger towards a common enemy. He immediately said, "Don't worry, Boss, leave the virtual world to me." Little Four recalled the monitoring of the legacy mission, and reminded himself again and again that he needed to be more careful than careful — he must not reveal any openings that could bring the threat of death to his boss.

Right after that, Little Four tacked on worriedly, "But, that person still hasn't been exposed till now. Being able to kill dad without anyone finding out about them, they

must be a skilled schemer. Can we beat him?" Little Four didn't think his boss was the type that plotted well.

"If I can't do it alone, I'll just have to find a few helpers." Ling Lan smiled coldly. Initially, she had not wanted to be a boss, but reality was forcing her to become one even if she didn't want to. How could she go up against some military bigwigs without having some helpers on her side?

That's right, Ling Lan's sights were now set on Han Jijyun. Ling Lan had full confidence in her fighting skills — if she just worked at it, though she couldn't guarantee she'd reach god-class level, getting to ace or imperial level was still possible. However, when it came to plotting and scheming, Ling Lan was at a loss, while the opponent was a master at it. Therefore, she could only seek external help. Now, of the few followers by her side, only Han Jijyun's intelligence was clearly a head above the others, and recently, that intelligence was gradually moving towards the side of cunning and slyness.

It looked like she would have to push things a little more, and make Han Jijyun become even more sly and cunning... that's what Ling Lan was thinking.

After making this decision, Ling Lan pushed the matter aside. After all, it was still too early to look for the opponent; Ling Lan wouldn't rush to seek out the other's tracks now while her own wings were still developing.

Temporarily setting the matter aside, Ling Lan started to study the controls of the rabbit mecha seriously, slowly experimenting with making the mecha walk. After all, this was the very first step of controlling mecha. Have you ever seen a mecha that couldn't walk, but which could hack at someone with a knife?

Alright, the 'walk' of bestial mecha was more like jumps and leaps, especially for a rabbit. The hind legs were designed to be much stouter than the forelegs, so Ling Lan would first have to learn how to get the hind legs to spring. Luckily, Ling Lan need only control it with her fingers, so there was no discomfort in trying to adapt.

After stumbling and face-planting a couple of times, Ling Lan finally grasped hold of the ability to move the rabbit mecha. Of course, she still could not get the mecha to hop in a straight line just yet. Watching as her mecha jumped left and right, but never in a straight line, Ling Lan sweatdropped.

Just like that, Ling Lan immersed herself in mecha training. By the time Little Four nudged her back to awareness of her surroundings, it was already time to log off.

Because Ling Lan had Little Four to cover for her, she logged off directly at the mecha training hall. Strolling out of the login pod, she took a quick shower and then went downstairs.

In the dining room, Lan Luofeng was humming as she set out dishes on the table. Of course, these dishes were all prepared by the servants; Lan Luofeng was a young mistress of a noble family who had led a pampered life — the most she could do was fry an egg, and even then the quality was not guaranteed... it could very well be undercooked or overcooked.

Seeing Ling Lan come down, Lan Luofeng smiled. "My baby, if you still hadn't come down, I was about to go up and call you."

There was nothing Ling Lan could say in response to this. Previously, there had been several times when she had been forced offline by Lan Luofeng's persistent pestering. Her mum was the type of person that wouldn't give up before she achieved her goal. Trying to match her in terms of patience, Ling Lan didn't think much of her odds.

Ling Lan and Lan Luofeng ate together as usual. Ling Lan had only taken a few bites when she could not help but ask, "Mum, did you know that dad was a god-class operator?"

Lan Luofeng nodded, "I knew. Why?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Ling Lan moodily.

Chapter 115

The Tragic Rabbit!

"Why should I have told you? Would his being a god-class operator affect your life in any way?" Lan Luofeng cast a confused glance at Ling Lan. "Not to mention he has already left us, and even if he were by our side, whether or not he is a god-class operator, what does that have to do with us?"

Ling Lan thought about it and felt that what Lan Luofeng said was correct. Knowing if Ling Xiao was a god-class operator or not really didn't have much impact on her life at all.

Lan Luofeng picked up a mouthful of Ling Lan's favourite side-dish with her chopsticks and placed it in Ling Lan's bowl, and continued to say, "Also, Ling Xiao is just Ling Xiao. He's a normal person, and also my husband, your daddy. Whether he's a god-class operator or not, he's still my husband and your daddy. These two identities will never change."

Lan Luofeng's words caused Ling Lan's body to jerk in realisation, and the restlessness she had felt after finding out that Ling Xiao was a god-class operator abruptly disappeared.

"Also, Baby Lan, don't let your daddy's status influence your choices in the future. You must remember — you are you. You just coincidentally have a father named Ling Xiao, that's all." Lan Luofeng was somewhat worried, afraid that her daughter would choose to do things she didn't like just because of Ling Xiao, like try to become a mecha operator or something. "I hope that you'll choose what you like to do in the future, and not choose out of some obligation or whatever other reason..."

Lan Luofeng's words caused Ling Lan to look at her mum with new eyes; she felt as if she was getting to know a new side of Lan Luofeng.

Ling Lan reckoned that among all the females that her dad had encountered, her mum was the only one who didn't treat her dad as someone overwhelmingly strong or an idol or perhaps even as a long-term food provider. She had very simply and purely seen him as a regular person to live an average life with. And so, her dad had chosen

her mum... yup, decisively making a move even before her mum had become an adult.

"Thanks, Mum!" said Ling Lan sincerely. She finished off all of the side-dishes that Lan Luofeng had given her and then lifted her head from her bowl to ask, "Mum, say, do you think Dad could still be alive?"

Lan Luofeng's lips bloomed with a radiant smile, and she nodded decisively and said, "Yes, I think your daddy wouldn't die so easily. He's a god-class operator!" Her tone concealed none of her admiration and pride for Ling Xiao.

Ling Lan smiled too then. Since her own mum wished for this, then she would also hold onto this hope as well. Besides, it was just like her mum said — a god-class operator wouldn't just die that easily...

Ling Lan finished eating and then went with her mum to the field outside to walk off the meal. After that, she returned to a training room to practise several sets of physical skills. In particular, Ling Lan ran through the scout academy's foundational physical skills set at least 10 times, because Ling Xiao had mentioned that this set of physical skills was not as simple as it seemed. It may even be a great help when operating mecha and advancing in the future.

At the end, she took a shower and lay down to sleep. Entering the learning space as usual, she saw Little Four sitting on the ground. There were countless papers piled high beside him, and he was flipping through several more sheets of paper in his hands.

Ling Lan asked curiously, "Little Four, what are you doing?"

Perhaps Little Four had been too engrossed in what he was doing; he was so frightened by Ling Lan's voice that he flung his arms out — the papers in his hands were thrown into the air, and one of them landed on his head.

Little Four quickly pulled down that piece of paper. Seeing Ling Lan grinning at him, as if amused by his panicked performance, Little Four said grumpily, "Boss, why did you have to sneak up on me? You almost scared me to death!"

"Scared you to death? Why? Were you doing something bad?" teased Ling Lan.

Unexpectedly, Little Four's face paled. He quickly reached out and gathered the papers in front of him, pulling them close. Ling Lan looked at him suspiciously and said, "Don't

tell me you really were doing something bad?"

Little Four choked out a nervous laugh. "No way! I was just gathering some information, things about Dad and also stuff about mecha."

When Little Four mentioned mecha, he was mumbling somewhat unintelligibly, but Ling Lan's attention had been fully captured by 'things about Dad'. She cautioned Little Four, "Gathering the information may be important, but make sure you stay concealed. Don't let anyone discover you."

Little Four smiled and said, "Relax, Boss!"

"Still..." Ling Lan pointed at the pile of paper in front of Little Four, "Is this necessary?" Frankly, Little Four could just absorb the information directly into his system procedures — he really didn't have to materialize the information onto these sheets and sheets of white paper.

"Boss, don't you feel that words on paper is classy?" asked Little Four, expression dreamy. "Reading from paper, doesn't it make me seem very intelligent?"

This troublemaking brat — so he's just trying to show off! Ling Lan said huffily, "In that case, you can continue being intelligent. I'm going into the learning space to learn now."

Ling Lan's unimpressed attitude made Little Four feel that there was now a generation gap between him and Boss. Thus, he sulkily waved Ling Lan away, indicating for her to not disturb his work.

Ling Lan could only shake her head silently at Little Four's heartlessness. She sighed to herself, mourning the fact that little brats nowadays were just too spoilt and pampered. She was just about to push open the doors to the physical skills learning area when from the corner of her eye, she noticed a large door to the side. A word had finally appeared on it: Mecha!

Could it be that because she had encountered mecha, the learning space had also activated a mecha course?

Ling Lan's heart heated up and she decisively turned away from the physical skills doorway. Tentatively, she prodded the door labelled 'mecha' and felt it move slightly. It wasn't like before when the door was fused to the wall, completely immovable.

Ling Lan gave the door a hard shove and the door swung open with a bang. She walked inside and saw an endless space. In the near distance, a rugged soldier with a full beard was guffawing boisterously as he watched her approach.

"Haha, Ling Lan, you're finally here!" The soldier's energetic greeting made Ling Lan glance at him cautiously. Could he be a new instructor?

The personalities of the instructors Ling Lan had met so far were all different... Number One was cold and cool to the extreme, and meant every word he said. Number Five liked to laugh, but was sly and manipulative to the extreme, and was unbelievably perverse, capable of chilling others to the bone. Number Nine was very strict and looked very cold and aloof, but was actually a woman with a soft heart — Ling Lan had received much care from her since the very beginning.

As such, Ling Lan wasn't afraid of stern-faced teachers, but was fearful of those with smiling faces and passionate appearances; she had been traumatized by Number Five's torments... So, seeing the other's enthusiasm and wide smile, she was instantly on her guard. If by any chance this was another instructor like Number Five, she would definitely be toyed with most terribly.

"Don't think so much. I'm not Number Five. I have no interest in torturing people. Right, I'm your mecha instructor, Number Three. In fact, when you turned 6 years old, I had already wanted to activate the mecha course. But, due to your real-life situation back then, Big Brother Number One refused my request. I had thought that I'd have to wait for another 5 to 6 years before it came up again. Unexpectedly, you activated it yourself after just one year, hahahahaha... that's great!" Number Three laughed up at the sky, as if immensely pleased with Ling Lan's choice. Looks like he had really become impatient with waiting.

The laughter finally stopped, but before Ling Lan could ask any questions, Number Three snapped his fingers. A rabbit mecha dropped from the sky, landing directly in front of Ling Lan. Ling Lan could only stare blankly at its familiar appearance. "Why is it this mecha?"

Number Three replied helplessly, "Can't help it, our mecha's controls are somewhat different from those in your world, so we had to let the space assistant gather all the mecha models and controls of this world. So far, the space assistant has only sent in the data for this one mecha. Of course, this is also because you selected this mecha..."

Ling Lan finally understood why Little Four had had that dodgy look in the hall of the learning space. It turned out that he had secretly sent the stats of the rabbit mecha into the learning space, making it the initiate mecha for her mecha training. Dammit. He knew that she didn't really like the rabbit mecha — couldn't he have changed things a little and brought in some other models?

Of course, Ling Lan was most upset at her own luck. If she had managed to draw a more formidable mecha to begin with, then she wouldn't have to take Number Three's mocking gaze.

Regardless of how gloomy Ling Lan felt, she still had to listen to Instructor Number Three's commands. She got into the cockpit of the rabbit mecha. As expected, the control buttons were the same, no changes whatsoever.

Ling Lan activated the mecha, and the mecha quickly booted up successfully. She then opened the mecha's screen to display the situation outside, but found that the initially vacant and open space had now become an extremely narrow tunnel. By Ling Lan's estimation, the tunnel was just 1.5 times the width of the mecha itself. To successfully make her way through the tunnel, it would require very fine control of the mecha's movement. Additionally, there were also some irregular obstacles within the tunnel — on the floor, and on the walls on both sides — which were probably designed to test a mecha operator's ability to handle the controls to adjust to circumstances.

"Firstly, you'll need to go through obstacle course training. Can you see the numbers on the bottom of the screen?" Number Three's voice rang out beside Ling Lan's ear.

Ling Lan looked at the screen as Instructor Number Three said, and sure enough, on the lower part of the screen, the numbers 03.00.00 were flashing at her, reminding Ling Lan of their existence.

"This is a countdown timer for 3 minutes. You'll need to complete this obstacle course within 3 minutes to pass. And your deadline to complete this mission is just one week." Number Three's tone was tinged with obvious schadenfreude.

F*ck! Teaching her nothing and giving her a mission right off the bat? Instructor Number Three, you're a mecha instructor, not a mission distributor — isn't what you're doing too shameless? Before Ling Lan could give voice to her complaints, the flashing numbers on the lower half of the screen began to count down rapidly.

Ling Lan's eyelid twitched. Abruptly, she found that with the speed of her mecha's jumps, 3 minutes weren't long at all.

At this moment, Number Three's gleeful voice rang out once more, "Oh right, every time you fail an attempt, the system will dole out punishment. You hang in there now!"

Hearing this, Ling Lan frantically operated her mecha. Her fingers flew, actually blowing past the speed limits she had managed to achieve before this... the system's punishment was not pleasant at all — she really didn't want to experience it ever again.

However, dreams are beautiful but reality is cruel. Ling Lan slammed into a wall for the nth time, and after repeatedly embodying the rabbit in the tale '*waiting for a rabbit by a tree stump*'¹, the timer finally hit zero. Overall, she had only managed to jump forward a few metres. Oh, tragic rabbit... Ling Lan had yet to finish bemoaning the poor rabbit when a wave of numbing pain swept over her body...

Chapter 116

Arbitrary Punishment!

"Dammit, I just knew this would happen!" Ling Lan swore loudly. She could almost see the faint smoke rising from her mouth, ugh... she was about to be completely cooked by electricity.

Unfortunately, before she could get over the pain and numbness left by this electrocution, the scene before her shifted abruptly. She was brought along with her mecha back to the start of the obstacle course. And then, the learning space did not give Ling Lan any time to rest, immediately restarting the 3-minute countdown once more.

Seeing this, Ling Lan finally couldn't help but curse silently. *FUCK!*

After that, it was another flurry of frantic movements to control the rabbit mecha, to send it lunging out desperately. Perhaps tragedy likes to repeat itself, for Ling Lan had only taken a few hops when she once again slammed into a wall. And then she bounced back, and hit the wall again, and bounced back, and... in the end, she still hit the wall again...

The image before Ling Lan was a constant loop of falling and rolling around — the result of all this wall-slamming was a dizzy head and spinning eyes. Once again, Ling Lan was experiencing the feelings of the unfortunate rabbit in the folktale of '*waiting for a rabbit by a tree stump*'!

Failure, followed by yet more failure! Electrocution after electrocution, restart after restart... Ling Lan had no idea how many times she had restarted this mission anymore. She estimated that she hadn't even managed to get 50 metres into the tunnel so far. And what's worse, she didn't even know how long this blasted tunnel was in total.

The reason to blame for Ling Lan's constant wall-slamming was that the tunnel was really just too narrow. There were times when Ling Lan clearly felt she had not made any mistakes with the controls, and even the screen display was telling her that her jump coordinates were in a straight line — but unfortunately, the mecha still somehow

ended up slamming into the wall. This caused Ling Lan to become rather discouraged, frustration rearing up within her heart.

Goddammit! This tunnel just did not allow for any bit of error in her controls — was this the standard a newbie should have? Ling Lan, having been electrocuted to within an inch of her life, was filled with simmering indignation. Hells, it was like she thought, nothing good ever came from men who liked to smile...

After god-knows how many failures, Ling Lan's spirit was worn down to the brink. After one last electrocution, she was summarily thrown out of the mission space, and Ling Lan blearily found herself in the great hall of the learning space once again.

The hall was no longer as messy as when Ling Lan had first arrived; Little Four had tidied up the floor. When he saw Ling Lan appear suddenly before him, he was startled by her appearance and yelled, "Boss, you were electrocuted?!"

Ling Lan's head was heavy — she only stared uncomprehendingly at Little Four in response.

Seeing this, Little Four couldn't help but sigh and shake his head. With a sympathetic flick of his finger, a large full-length mirror appeared before Ling Lan.

In the reflection of the mirror, a completely black figure looked out blankly at them. There were even wisps of black smoke still wafting off the figure, the only break in the black being the whites of the figure's eyes... oh, right, the figure's teeth were still white too! Ling Lan bared her teeth at the mirror, revealing her set of straight white teeth. Contrasted with the black, her teeth gleamed even whiter than usual.

Not just that, Ling Lan's hair was all standing up, puffed up in curls. They reminded Ling Lan of the instant noodles of her past life — really, her appearance was as bizarre as one could imagine.

"AH! Number Three, I want to kill him!" This horrible state of hers made Ling Lan scream out in frustration. Right now, she did not look one bit like the cute moe shota that she usually looked like — she was a total black phantom that had crawled out from the hearth.

Little Four smothered a laugh with his hand, "Boss, so you've met Number Three! Hehe, don't be fooled by his brash and forthright-looking face; he actually loves to play pranks on people."

Ling Lan was stunned. "You know them, Little Four?" She had always thought that Little Four belonged to a different system than the instructors, and so would not meet each other. Looks like that wasn't the case.

"Of course! There are many things I don't understand which require their help, like with those battle... well, I just know them." Little Four had almost let the truth slip. It turned out that those moves he had helped Ling Lan modify and appropriate was actually the hard work of the instructors. Little Four had just shamelessly claimed the credit for himself.

Sensing something amiss with Little Four's words, Ling Lan stared at him suspiciously. Little Four's heart started pounding erratically, afraid that his deceit would be discovered by his boss. He quickly changed the topic, saying, "Boss, how did you end up this way?"

At Little Four's question, Ling Lan was in no mood to think more about the holes in Little Four's speech. She sighed softly and said tiredly, "Instructor Number Three gave me a mecha control mission..." She scratched her head, mussing up her instant-noodle hair into a bird's nest, and then shouted resentfully, "Argh...! He didn't teach me anything! Just told me to get through that crazily narrow beyond narrow tunnel within 3 minutes. How would that be possible?"

Ling Lan's words instantly made Little Four raise his little fists in anger as well. With sympathetic indignation, he said, "Yeah, how could Number Three be so unreasonable? No matter what, he should give Boss some time to adapt!"

"Er... actually, he did in fact give me a week's time to finish it," admitted Ling Lan awkwardly.

"Then, Boss, how did you end up so messed up?" Wasn't it just training? Why did it look like she had had to go through a mountain of swords and swim through a sea of flames?

Gloomily, Ling Lan said, "Though it was training, every time I failed, I would be electrocuted!"

Little Four's eyes popped out in disbelief, and he muttered, "How can that be, electrocuted just for failing in training? When did the system become so strict?" That said, he cast a pitying glance at Ling Lan. "Boss, you're in big trouble. If you fail the

mission this time, I think you'll lose a layer of skin even if you don't die."

Hearing this, Ling Lan's spirits drooped even more. "Yeah, I didn't expect to be electrocuted so badly just for failing in training... if I can't pass this mission a week later..." Ling Lan shuddered violently, the sense of doom in her heart becoming even heavier.

The learning space's punishments came in many bizarre forms, but every type would stay with you for the rest of your life... no one would be willing to go through it again if they could help it. Ling Lan had failed N-times under Instructor Number Five's tutelage, and so had experienced a multitude of mind-breaking punishments. All in all, she really never wanted to experience them ever again.

"But it's really odd..." Little Four sat on a step, face cupped in his hands as he said in a confused tone, "Since you were given a time limit for completion, why would you still be punished after failing during training, Boss? This doesn't seem to match up with the system's settings..."

Little Four was the most familiar with the system of the learning space — although the system was very strict, its every step would be executed strictly according to the guidelines of the learning space. Could there be some other reason for this deviation in behaviour?

Hearing what Little Four had to say, Ling Lan couldn't help but wonder, "Could it be that Instructor Number Three was intentionally messing with me?"

Little Four threw a disdainful glance at his boss. "The instructors are only in charge of assigning missions. They don't have the jurisdiction to give out punishment..."

But Ling Lan persisted, "Then what's up with Instructor Number Five's punishments? The degree of perversity involved is absolutely a sign of his work."

Little Four explained, "That's because Boss had already failed the mission. Among all the punishments offered by the system, the instructor has the right to choose which one is implemented."

Ling Lan understood then. However, this just deepened the mystery — why would the system punish her for no reason when she only failed in training?

Little Four searched through the rules of the learning space, and finally found a

regulation that somewhat fit this strange scenario. "Boss, when you were training, did you do anything against the rules?"

During training, if the host did anything the system viewed as breaking its rules, the system would implement appropriate punishment according to the severity of the violation!

Ling Lan gave it some serious thought, and felt that other than controlling the mecha to jump and slam into walls, she really had not done anything else. Could it be that the system considered her wall-slamming as the terrible sin of vandalism, and assigned punishment for it?

Ling Lan told Little Four her guess, and Little Four thumped the table in agreement. His boss's assumption made sense.

However, Little Four was extremely curious. "Boss, why did you have to jump and slam into the wall? Wouldn't it be fine if you just walked slowly?"

Ling Lan said with some embarrassment, "Isn't it all because of that 3 minute countdown timer? I wanted to speed up and quickly complete the mission, but the faster I went, the harder the mecha was to control. And once I hit a wall, the mecha would bounce around like a rubber ball, making it impossible for me to control. Ahem! In the end, I could only become a dizzy rabbit..."

When a mecha receives a concussive force, 30% of it would be realistically reflected upon Ling Lan's body. Even if Ling Lan's body was as strong as an ox, the consecutive impacts and tumbles had still been too much for Ling Lan. Disoriented and unwell, she had thoroughly experienced what it felt like to be a rabbit slamming into a tree.

"Boss, you know very well that you won't be able to complete this mission within 3 minutes with your current ability level. So, why are you rushing it? Why don't you first familiarize yourself with the controls to get the rabbit to walk? Slow down as much as possible and work hard so you don't hit the wall. Take your time and walk through the tunnel slowly and familiarize yourself with the path. Wouldn't that be better?" Little Four just could not understand Ling Lan's decision. After all, didn't she have an entire week to figure it out? Why was she so impatient?

Ling Lan said moodily, "It's not that I don't want to! But Instructor Number Three said, if I fail there would be punishment. Also, once the time is up, I'll be brought back to

the starting point. How am I supposed to get used to the tunnel..." Suddenly, Ling Lan jerked, thinking of something. Her gaze brightened instantly.

"Thank you, Little Four!" Before Little Four could react to this outburst, Ling Lan had pulled Little Four into a hug and dropped a smacking kiss onto his soft and pink little cheek. This sudden affectionate action immediately crashed Little Four's thought processes — his two eyes were wide as saucers, and his entire body froze up.

Ling Lan did not notice that Little Four's spirit had been sent flying off by her unexpected kiss. She took a few large strides to stand once more before the doorway of mecha, and purposefully pushed it open. She needed to test her hypothesis to see whether she was right.

Entering the doorway, she saw Instructor Number Three still standing beside that rabbit mecha. Seeing Ling Lan return, Instructor Number Three said with an expression of surprise, "I thought you were only coming back tomorrow? How do you still have strength to train?"

Ling Lan said coldly, "I'm not that weak." If it really was as she thought, Instructor Number Three was really just too sly.

Instructor Number Three seemed not to see Ling Lan's dark expression. With a hearty laugh, he said, "That's great! Get into the mecha then."

Chapter 117

The Learning Space's Warning!

Ling Lan smoothly leapt up into the mecha's cockpit, and then swiftly closed the door and activated the mecha. After 3 minutes, on the lower right corner of the display screen, the 3-minute countdown timer appeared once more. As before, the numbers flashed at her, a constant reminder of their presence.

This time, Ling Lan only took one glance at the numbers before looking away. This was not because the string of numbers made her nervous, but because she wanted to focus on the final image being displayed on the screen.

Sure enough, the image on the screen changed, and Ling Lan was once again at the entrance of the test tunnel. The learning space did not give Ling Lan much time to prepare; the numbers on the bottom of the screen began to roll, the countdown had begun...

This time, Ling Lan did not rush — she did not try to increase her hand speed desperately to push the mecha out as fast as she could — instead, she chose to decrease her hand speed. Her current speed was definitely not fast, with some pauses mixed in at times. She worked hard to coordinate her two hands, and facing the small and narrow tunnel, she controlled the rabbit mecha to hop lightly into it!

This hop was very short, not even 2 metres, not even the length of her rabbit mecha's body. However, this caution guaranteed that she made no mistakes this time. Slowly but steadily, she hopped her way to the centre of the tunnel. There were still no mistakes.

Ling Lan did not rush to make the next jump — only after properly calculating the distance needed did she flex her fingers and operated the mecha to jump.

Having calmed down, no longer affected by the 3-minute countdown, Ling Lan now noticed that this seemingly straight tunnel actually had a slight curve to it. However, it would not be noticeable with the naked eye when moving at fast speeds.

Right then, Ling Lan finally understood why she had kept slamming into walls

previously. Having been unaware of the curve of the tunnel walls, even if she had used the coordinate data provided by the mecha and jumped to the marked coordinates, it would not have helped. Because in reality, she had already made a judgement error — all that awaited her was a crash into a wall.

3 minutes time wasn't very long, but it also wasn't very short. Ling Lan had just made her way through roughly 30 or so metres of the tunnel, avoiding several obstacles along the way, when her time ran out. However, Ling Lan was not aware of this. Because this time, strangely enough, the learning space did not impose punishment the moment the countdown hit zero. The electrocution did not happen, and Ling Lan also was not chased back to the starting point. Instead, after the timer hit zero, it did not stop, but continued to count down, going into the negatives...

All this happened silently, so Ling Lan, who was thoroughly focused on operating her mecha, noticed nothing... only after she had jumped a few more times, going about 10 metres deeper into the tunnel, did she remember to turn and look at the countdown timer. Ling Lan was wondering why the 3 minutes seemed to stretch on for so long this time.

Ling Lan glanced at the timer and saw that the timer was still moving, but this time, the numbers were not getting smaller, but getting larger and larger. In fright, Ling Lan abruptly stopped her hands, and the rabbit mecha immediately froze and lay down on the ground.

Looking closer, Ling Lan finally saw that the countdown timer was now displaying negative numbers. In other words, she had long gone beyond the allocated 3 minutes. Ling Lan started to think. Before this, she had been too anxious, desperately increasing her speed to charge and slam her way through the course, so much so that she completely ignored her surroundings. Thus, she had slammed into the walls repeatedly, and the final outcome was getting electrocuted after the timer ran out and being sent back to the beginning... why did the learning space not react this time, seemingly content to let her do as she pleased?

Ling Lan thought back to when she had pushed open the 'Mecha' door, and her conversation then with Instructor Number Three. She recalled how she had so easily fallen for Instructor Number Three's misdirection and believed that there would be punishment if she did not finish the mission after the 3 minutes on the timer ran out. She thought about how she had become overwhelmed with panic and frantically tried to make her mecha run forwards recklessly... she had really been so bloody stupid!

She had actually forgotten that, in the learning space, before a mission's deadline was up, there would not be any punishment for failing in training! She had had 7 full years of learning experience — and she had completely forgotten everything in that split second. No wonder the learning space had gotten mad. It had to be said that, ever since she had managed to obtain Ling Xiao's legacy from right under the military's noses, Ling Lan had become a little cocky. This made her lose her initial sense of caution.

Ling Lan mocked herself, "How shameful! I actually neglected such an obvious clue. And this trap would have been discovered easily if I had just stopped to think... is this because I've lost my mental balance? Because I thought I was stronger than most other people, so I became too proud?"

Was the learning space trying to tell me through punishment that I still don't have the right to strut around with my tail up ¹? Ling Lan had the realization that this electrocution wasn't punishing her for failing, but was punishing her for her recklessness and carelessness, as well as her loss of mental balance. This was a warning from the learning space!

Ling Lan's lips curved up into a slight smile, her eyes glittering. Although the learning space was somewhat offbeat at times, it would always step in to prevent her from making mistakes at key moments. She really felt that she was extremely fortunate to have received the learning space.

Having thought things through, Ling Lan's mind was at peace. She no longer worried about the so-called countdown timer, but merely focused all her attention on operating the mecha to slowly manoeuvre her way through this tunnel. The start of the tunnel was so narrow that it only allowed one mecha to squeeze through at a time, and though the tunnel gradually widened out, the number of obstacles also increased. There were even sections where there were obstacle *piles*, which required several consecutive hops to clear.

Ling Lan overcame each and every one of the challenges of the tunnel, but then, a new problem appeared. A huge boulder appeared before Ling Lan, and there just was not enough space on either side of the boulder for the large rabbit mecha to pass through. Moreover, there were several rocks of uneven height below the large boulder as well; this completely prevented any challenger from passing through the bottom of the boulder.

It only took one look for Ling Lan to determine the path she should take. Right at the

top of the boulder, there was a 'coincidental' gap with just enough room for the rabbit mecha to leap through. Note that she said 'leap through'. In other words, this time, she needed to make sure the rabbit mecha jumped high enough to reach the gap and moved forwards enough to clear the boulder, otherwise it would be all too easy to slam into the rock.

Ling Lan let the rabbit mecha's A.I. analyse the path she needed to take for this jump, along with the controls necessary for it. She then visualized it over and over in her mind, and only after she felt somewhat confident about it, did she get ready to move.

She controlled the mecha to retreat around 10 metres — the boulder was too tall, so she needed to use a run-up approach to build up momentum. The first time, Ling Lan sprinted up to the rock, but when she reached the jumping point, she felt that there was a deviation in her positioning and hit the emergency brakes. The mecha only managed to stop at a distance of 0.01 metres away from the rock, scaring the cold sweat out of Ling Lan.

The second time, she got the jumping position right, but she did not use enough power to reach the required height. Luckily, Ling Lan reacted quickly — at the moment she was about to hit the rock, she controlled the rabbit to kick out with its limbs at the rock, sending the mecha into a flip. She then controlled the mecha to land safely, avoiding the tragedy of slamming into the boulder...

These two failures gave Ling Lan a better idea of what to expect. On her third try, with a steady grasp of all the key points, Ling Lan successfully got her mecha to leap swiftly through the gap at the top of the boulder. At this moment, Ling Lan was still unaware that making her way through the various obstacles in the course had steadily built up her proficiency with the rabbit mecha's controls. From being flustered at the beginning, till being able to handle unforeseen circumstances with ease now, Ling Lan's improvement was truly phenomenal.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan was still adjusting. In order to handle all sorts of scenarios, she had subconsciously begun slowly merging the combat moves she had learned in real life with her mecha control process. And this, was truly the ultimate objective of this tunnel mission.

Within the learning space, the passing standard for mecha operators was that a mecha operator had to be able to control a mecha as if it were their own hands and feet, just as if the mecha were an extension of their own bodies. And this wasn't something

many people could do in the real world.

So, if Ling Lan wanted to pass, she still had much training to do to hone her mecha control! This also gave Ling Lan the false impression for a while that her mecha control was terrible...

After overcoming several more obstacles, Ling Lan finally arrived at the finish line, completing a full run of the tunnel. The time she used was slightly less than 32 minutes and 13 seconds. Of course, this duration was worlds apart from the mission requirement of 3 minutes. Still, Ling Lan wasn't particularly worried. This was because she knew that she had limited her hand speed for this run, keeping it at a normal level. Besides, this first full run was just to map out the tunnel and get to know the situation inside it, so she had wasted a lot of time at every obstacle. The second time would be different.

Reality proved that it was indeed as Ling Lan had expected. The second time, Ling Lan directly shortened the time used to 23 minutes, and her third pass was infinitely close to 20 minutes. However, this time became her current limit — in the following fourth, fifth, and sixth attempts, she maintained this result, never being able to break past the 20 minute barrier.

To ensure that she did not make a mistake and slam into the wall again, Ling Lan still did not unleash her hand speed; she continued to use the hand speed she used at the start to control the mecha. But after testing out several different ways of jumping without being able to break past the 20 minute barrier, Ling Lan decided to increase her hand speed by one level.

However, after raising her hand speed, Ling Lan started making mistakes. Although she was still extremely careful, she still could not help but lose control at a particularly sharp turn, slipping out of her intended path to careen towards the wall. But Ling Lan reacted quickly, no longer allowing herself to slam helplessly into the wall like before. Instead, she used all four limbs of the mecha to kick off from the wall, and riding the rebound, she moved her mecha back on the correct path. Of course, this was also due to the fact that her speed was not yet at the maximum, and so was still within the limits of Ling Lan's control.

Just like this, she shuffled and stumbled her way through the tunnel — she then found that her time had not gotten any better, and had in fact gotten slower than before, clocking in at around 21 minutes. However, Ling Lan was not discouraged. This new

speed would require some adjustment, and in the process of adjustment, it was perfectly normal to make some mistakes. As such, the time delay was within her expectations.

When she managed to fully get used to the new speed, Ling Lan was sure that she would be able to shorten the time to below 20 minutes.

And so Ling Lan maintained this speed, and went through the tunnel again and again, making adjustment after adjustment...

The night passed without conversation — Ling Lan did not even know when she was kicked out by the learning space. From early the next day, aside from the classes that she had to attend, Ling Lan spent all her time in the learning space training to pass the mission.

Of course, to reassure her mum, Ling Lan pretended to be in the virtual world by lying in a login pod. Ling Lan naturally also did not forget to instruct Little Four to fake her appearance in the virtual world to collect information from all the major subject halls. She had not forgotten the threat within the military — it would not do to let that party notice anything amiss.

Chapter 118

The Real No.1 of Year 4738

Ling Lan stood once more at the entrance to the tunnel; she had never stopped challenging it. She closed her eyes and counted the seconds, and then abruptly opened them again. Her eyes blazed with a vibrant light, and her fingers flew in a coordinated dance. With a strong push of its hindlegs, the rabbit mecha bounded into the tunnel.

At this moment, Ling Lan's entire body and soul were immersed in the mecha — she already knew the situation within the tunnel like the back of her hand, so there was no need for her to even think about how to overcome the obstacles. All of it was already a steady flow within her mind.

The rabbit mecha leapt and soared nimbly within that small and narrow space. At times it crawled, at times it leapt, at times it moved rapidly, at times it slowed to turn... quite a few times it narrowly scraped by a wall, where just a hairsbreadth closer would mean a forceful crash and a violent tumble.

This time, Ling Lan did not hit the wall at all, successfully making her way through the tunnel swiftly. She looked down at the time — as expected, she had finally broken past the 20-minute barrier. In fact, she had improved her time by a whole 5 minutes, ending the course within 15 minutes.

Compared to her first time, Ling Lan had undoubtedly reduced her time by half. However, to achieve the 3 minutes required to complete the mission, Ling Lan still had a long way to go. Still, Ling Lan was very happy. This progress proved that her control of the rabbit mecha had improved by a substantial margin.

Ling Lan wasn't anxious to raise her hand speed further at this point; instead, she continued to work on stabilizing her current hand speed. She practised over and over again — running the same obstacle course repetitively was very dry and boring. Making the mecha jump and leap and run to break through obstacles may have been new and exciting for the first run or two, but after the tenth time and beyond, all that was left was boredom. Fortunately, Ling Lan was a very tolerant person. The dry monotony and boredom of the exercise were not enough to turn her off and make her choose to give up halfway.

In this manner, she stayed in her house for three to four consecutive days. Then, Ling Lan was dragged out of the learning space by Little Four over an unexpected occurrence.

Back then, Ling Lan had been focused on her training in the tunnel to try and apply a higher hand speed. Just as she had been running, the scene in front of her eyes suddenly twisted and spun, becoming blurred and unfocused. By the time Ling Lan could see clearly again, she had already been brought to the great hall of the learning space.

Little Four was waiting for her there with an anxious expression. Seeing Ling Lan come out, Little Four immediately rushed over as he shouted, "Boss, hurry! Qi Long and the others are looking for you."

During this time, Little Four had been substituting Ling Lan to enter the virtual world. So, he was also responsible for reporting anything of note that happened there.

"Can't you handle it?" Ling Lan automatically assumed it was something to do with the virtual world. That's why she was rather surprised, because Little Four had patted his chest and guaranteed that he would be able to handle anything in the virtual world back when he had first taken on this duty.

"It's a real world issue. They were just trying to contact you online, and it looks urgent. They want you to go to the combat hall immediately. It looks like something major is happening," explained Little Four in a hurry.

Ling Lan was rather bewildered, unsure what could have happened to make Qi Long and the others so anxious. With a worried heart, she quickly left the learning space and climbed out of the login pod to the virtual world. She took a moment to change into a clean uniform, and then immediately set out for the combat hall.

The moment she arrived at the entrance to the combat hall, Ling Lan found that there was an unusually large crowd here today. She took a swift look around, and found that there were not just students from her grade, but also quite a number of students from the other grades. There were younger juniors who had just started school here, as well as seniors from a grade or two higher.

Among the groupings of blue and green, Ling Lan could even see some white and red — looks like there were also quite a few students from the special classes. Ling Lan

grew even more curious. What in the world had happened to make the students of the lower division gather here?

Although the scout academy had ten grades, these grades were in fact split into three different divisions. Grades 1 to 4 made up the lower division, 5 to 7 was the intermediate division, and 8 to 10 was the upper division. The students of every division had their own circles, and aside from those with intent, very few people were willing to cross these circles to get to know the students of the other divisions. Just take Ling Lan's group for example. They may know about the matters concerning the lower division students, but they only knew vague details about things to do with the intermediate division, and the upper division was completely out of the consideration of these lower division children.

Ling Lan immediately contacted Qi Long, and finding out that the others were at arena 3, she hurried over. On the way there, Ling Lan's ostentatious red uniform drew the admiration and envy of the surrounding merit class and regular class students.

Although Ling Lan kept a rather low profile within the academy, there were still quite a few people who recognised her. These people were talking in hushed whispers to the people beside them who didn't know Ling Lan.

"Do you know who that person in the red uniform is?" said one of the informed grade one students excitedly to a student beside him whom he had just met.

"A Special Class-A student? From which grade? I don't think I saw him at the cross-grade challenge matches." Some of the people who had no acquaintances in the upper grades naturally did not know much about their seniors.

"You should at least know about Qi Long, right?" Qi Long had obtained the top rank of the special classes multiple times in succession, and so had often appeared at the cross-grade challenge fights. Thus, even the new students knew him.

"Of course I know! The leading person in the second grade — I've seen him in the cross-grade challenge matches. I get excited just speaking of him! In the last challenge, he actually managed to challenge all the way up to grade 4 before losing. He really makes us lower grades proud!" It looked like this new student was a fan of Qi Long's; his face was filled with idolisation.

"Hehe, let me tell you... that person just now is Qi Long's boss! He's also in the second

grade." The informed one was very smug; he actually knew about the strongest hidden boss.

"No way!" Shocked cries rang out one after another — eavesdroppers drawn by their discussion all had expressions of disbelief on their faces. Qi Long was the high-profile academy star of the lower grades — how could a superior being like him submit and acknowledge another person as boss so easily? And someone from the same grade at that, with a lower ranking!

"Hmph, you really think Qi Long dominates the second grade? If my elder cousin sister wasn't in that grade, I may not have known about this secret." The ones who paid attention to the internal grade rankings were basically those in the same grade. Very few students from other grades would bother with the rankings of another grade, which was why most people from the lower grades and the upper grades would not know the internal matters.

"What secret? Tell us quick!" Those who loved uncovering the truth all began urging the informant to hurry up and reveal the secret he knew.

"My cousin sister said that, every time that person encountered Qi Long, he would automatically forfeit, never ever choosing to attack."

"Why?" Everyone wondered.

"Is it because he knew he couldn't win, so he chose not to fight? That doesn't mean that person is stronger than Qi Long though!" someone objected.

"I have proof. You all know that in the grade ranking matches, what's the least number of moves Qi Long took to defeat his opponent?"

"Yup, I remember someone mention it once. I think it was 3 moves, against the weakest opponent in the first round... Qi Long's combat skills are amazing — he's not just agile, his strength is also greater than others his age by too much. On top of that, his foundations are very solid, and I heard he has some sure-kill moves as well."

"But as the opponents get stronger, Qi Long also can't defeat them that easily anymore. From around 10 moves to over 10 moves, even using up to several hundred moves..."

"That's why I say, Qi Long is strong, but he still hasn't reached the level of domination," said the informant airily, nodding as he heard what everyone had to say about Qi

Long's abilities.

"You can't say that. Anyone who can enter the special classes in our academy is a talent from the cream of the crop. Qi Long being able to press down everyone his age already proves that he is extremely outstanding." The other people felt that the informant was being rather unreasonable with his comments.

"Hehe, once, that person managed to defeat an opponent in... guess how many moves?" asked the informant coldly, in response to the others doubting his words.

"What's his strength like? You can't just ask us to guess blindly without any comparison point."

"That opponent was also from the special classes. Qi Long managed to defeat that person in roughly 50 moves." The informant provided a comparison point.

"About 50 moves?"

"Could it be less than the number of moves Qi Long needed?" Seeing the informant's impassive face, everyone was shocked. "40 moves? Or maybe 30 moves?"

The informant just smiled but said nothing.

Everyone there drew a cold breath. "20 or so moves? Maybe about over 10 moves?" Everyone felt that their guesses were already very bold.

Sadly, the informant did not seem to agree. He shook his head, sighing, and said, "Can't you all be more daring with your guesses?"

"Within 10 moves?" In a sea of silence, a wavering voice piped up quietly. This guess made everyone hold their breath, waiting for the informant to respond.

"Within 10 moves? Hehehe, you're all wrong. He only used one move..." revealed the informant proudly, just as if Ling Lan was his own boss.

"Woah, that strong?!" There was a cacophony as everyone exclaimed in shock. If this were true, then that person was definitely the reigning champ of the second grade.

"I predict that, if they really fought, even Qi Long wouldn't be able to hold out for long." The informant finally gave his hypothesis.

"Then why would he choose to forfeit? If he became the top rank, then he would be able to participate in the cross-grade challenge!" Some people felt it was a shame, because they had not been able to see that person's awesomeness in defeating his opponent in one move.

"Who knows? Perhaps he prefers to keep a low profile." An oracle of truth ¹ presented himself.

"Right, what's that person called?" Those with superior strength would always garner respect; the surrounding students were eager to find out the identity of their new idol from the informant.

"Ling Lan, the true number 1 of Year 4738 ^{2...}"

Ling Lan deeply mourned the fact that her hearing was so sharp — she had actually heard every single bit of gossip loud and clear. She had already tried her best to keep a low profile! Who knew that someone had still found her memorable? Still, Ling Lan wasn't really bothered. This gossip would probably just circulate among the lower division; the upper division would have no interest in following the gossip within their circle. So, no one outside would care or recognise her...

Very soon, she had rushed to arena 3, and she immediately saw Qi Long and the others waiting in front of the stage. Ling Lan walked over quickly and asked, "Qi Long, why did you call me to come over in such a hurry? What exactly is going on?"

Subconsciously, Qi Long glanced at Han Jijyun, clueing Ling Lan in that it was probably Han Jijyun's idea to call her here.

Sure enough, Han Jijyun received Qi Long's signal, and spoke up, "Boss Lan, I was the one who asked Qi Long to call you here. Actually, calling you here this time is to discuss the matter of Lin Zhong-qing."

"Him? Is there any connection to us?" Ling Lan was too busy; she did not have that much time and effort to go worry about the other students in her class who she was just on regular terms with.

"Of course there's no connection right now, but there'll soon be one." The corner of Han Jijyun's lips quirked up, and there was actually a trace of deviousness in his smirk.

Chapter 119

Taking Lin Zhong-Qing In as a Follower?

Han Jijyun's words made Ling Lan very curious. With a slight quirk of her brow, she waited for Han Jijyun to continue explaining.

"Earlier, Lin Zhong-qing contacted me urgently in the virtual world. He hopes that we can help him out, because he has been blockaded by Li Yingjie."

"What? That punk Li Yingjie hasn't given up on making Lin Zhong-qing submit?" Ling Lan was rather speechless to hear that. This Li Yingjie was really too stubborn — starting back in the first grade, ever since Lin Zhong-qing had refused to be his subordinate, this brat had been determined to pick a bone with Lin Zhong-qing. He kept finding opportunities to make trouble for Lin Zhong-qing, trying to make Lin Zhong-qing submit to him. As luck would have it, Lin Zhong-qing was also someone who was open to persuasion but not to coercion — the more Li Yingjie tried to force the issue, the more he refused to submit. Thus, the two of them had become locked in a never-ending feud.

"It can't be helped. Li Yingjie is now stuck riding the tiger ¹. Ever since he hit a dead end with Lin Zhong-qing, he thoroughly lost all credibility to become the boss of the special classes. Many students in class are now just agreeing in words but not in mind — some have even mocked him behind his back, saying that he should handle Lin Zhong-qing first before doing the talking. So, this year hasn't been easy for Lin Zhong-qing."

There was one more thing Han Jijyun didn't say. Another reason why Li Yingjie couldn't become the undisputed boss of year 4738 was the existence of their group. Compared to Lin Zhong-qing, Li Yingjie actually hated them even more for blocking his way. It's just that Qi Long alone was already hard for him to handle, not to mention Ling Lan, who was stronger than Qi Long. So, Li Yingjie, who was unable to take his anger out on them, could only go after the vulnerable Lin Zhong-qing who had no one backing him.

At the heart of the matter, Lin Zhong-qing was actually collateral damage of Li Yingjie's dispute with them... Han Jijyun sighed deeply. Although the academy tried its best to

minimize the influence of family background among the students, setting up lots of regulations preventing students from possessing special rights due to their backgrounds, was there any child who was stupid among those who could enter the Central Scout Academy's special classes? A full year of time and more had been enough for them seek out the loopholes in these regulations. With that, they managed to artfully avoid the rigid external protection of the academy, using other methods within the boundaries of the rules to force some children without reliable backgrounds to become their attendants, subordinates, or even gophers...

In Special Class-A, most of the children came from some sort of weighted background. After all, genes determined everything — it was much more likely for a powerful and wealthy elite family to produce an outstanding child. So, in the Special Class-A of Year 4738, there were only three or four people from more common family backgrounds. Besides Lin Zhong-qing who stood his ground to keep his independence, the others had all chosen to rely on other classmates with stronger abilities and backgrounds.

Among the array of wealthy and powerful backgrounds present in the class, Ling Lan's background (leaving aside Ling Xiao's identity) was considered insignificant, but no one dared to bother him. In the academy, background wasn't the most important thing — might was the foundation which truly allowed a person to stand their ground.

Though Lin Zhong-qing, who had come from a poor district, had been gradually increasing his strength, the top 5 of the class could still handle him easily. In other words, Lin Zhong-qing was the easiest to handle among all of the Special Class-A children — who else could Li Yingjie target if not him?

However, Lin Zhong-qing himself knew that he would not be able to stand up against Li Yingjie. So he had chosen to tolerate — no matter how much Li Yingjie taunted him or insulted him, he had taken it and refused to react. This made Han Jijyun admire him greatly for his ability to restrain himself for a greater purpose.

"Hasn't he been targeted before all this while? Didn't he manage to resolve it all himself so far? Why does he want our help this time?" Ling Lan was curious. She knew very well that even though Lin Zhong-qing was a poor commoner, he had a prideful heart. Unless there was no other choice, he wouldn't have reached out for their help.

What could have happened? What could be grave enough to corner Lin Zhong-qing? Ling Lan stroked her jaw absent-mindedly as she thought about it.

Han Jijyun replied, "It's like this. Lin Zhong-qing told me that the opponent invoked the rule of nemesis combat, and challenged him to an arena battle. The one who loses will have to recognize the other as boss, and become his subordinate. A nemesis combat match cannot be avoided. The moment one chooses to refuse the fight, the academy A.I. will see that as a forfeit and automatically declare it as the loss of the side which refused... This time, Li Yingjie was smart. He used the combat rules of the academy."

"How did Lin Zhong-qing fall for it? Hasn't he always been careful?" To avoid Li Yingjie's taunts and challenges, Lin Zhong-qing had learned all he could about the academy's rules. He was always careful to stay away from things that wouldn't benefit him, but it looks like he had been set up this time.

"Yes, well, in the virtual world, Li Yingjie recruited a regular class student and sent him to offend Lin Zhong-qing. You know how as well how all the students of Special Class-A have their pride. They would never permit someone else to trample over it easily. So, Lin Zhong-qing chose to teach him a lesson... and then, this was the result..."

"The other boy recorded a video of himself being beaten up and submitted it to the school A.I. to request for a nemesis combat match. After it was approved, he challenged Lin Zhong-qing. Under nemesis combat mode, Lin Zhong-qing cannot refuse, so he had no choice but to accept." Ling Lan naturally knew what was going on instantly. "Looks like Li Yingjie really invested a lot of thought and effort to trap Lin Zhong-qing. For this plan, he had to complete the team formation mission in the virtual world. He's most likely the third person of our second grade to succeed in building a team..."

Only teams would allow the members of the team to substitute amongst themselves freely. And so, in the end, the one Lin Zhong-qing had to fight was no longer that regular class student, but Li Yingjie.

"That fellow is really willing to pay to get Lin Zhong-qing, actually willing to waste a team member slot." Each team only had six member slots, and after the members had been chosen, the team members could no longer be changed. The existence of teams was a way for the academy to foster cooperation and team battle sense among the students. It was also a way to cultivate lasting bonds among team members, so that the team members would be able to learn more responsibility by watching out for each other, lending each other a hand, and progressing together.

The growth and strength of each individual member of the team would also be a determining factor in when they'd be able to enter the real virtual world. Once students reached the age of 13, they would have the right to challenge for the right to exit. If successful, the Central Scout Academy would remove the restrictions on those children, and give them free access to the virtual world. Mind you, only in the extended virtual world would they be able to experience mecha controls, and this... *this was the* dream of all the students of the scout academy. All the children dreamt of the day they could operate mecha!

Thus, every team was very particular about its members. They wouldn't take in just anyone, unless a team member accidentally becomes incapacitated... that's why, the members of a team were definitely the best of friends, steadfast comrades that one would be willing to fight beside till they graduated from the scout academy.

"What does Lin Zhong-qing want exactly?" Ling Lan had an inkling of what Lin Zhong-qing's objective was, and her brow furrowed slightly.

"He wants to join us." Sure enough, Han Jijyun gave voice to the answer Ling Lan had thought of.

"I don't find him promising." Ling Lan didn't really like Lin Zhong-qing. She felt that Lin Zhong-qing was just too tolerant — in contrast with Ling Lan's voluntary self-restraint and tolerance, Lin Zhong-qing's brand of tolerance was forced by external pressure. As a result, he was very moody and sombre, and his gaze was always dark with murky shadows. Letting this kind of person join them may very well bring an unstable element into their team.

Ling Lan was totally preparing to lead Qi Long and the others to beat the exit challenge the moment they all turned 13. As such, she didn't want there to be any surprises.

"He's stated clearly that he wants to become Boss's subordinate, and that he's willing to serve you loyally," added Han Jijyun. It looked like he really favoured Lin Zhong-qing's addition to their team.

Ling Lan still wasn't moved. She had the Ling family loyalists, who were way more reliable than Lin Zhong-qing.

"Actually, Lin Zhong-qing is not a bad addition. In my opinion, he chose us only after thinking it over very seriously. He probably wouldn't betray us. You should know that

right now, in Special Class-A, there are only 2 teams which can match up with Li Yingjie's group. One would be the Wu Jiong-Ye Xu team, and the other is our team," explained Luo Lang, chiming in. "But the Wu Jiong-Ye Xu team is aligned with the federal military system, and Lin Zhong-qing really dislikes this sort of authoritarian elitism. So, he doesn't really want to join them, which is why he chose us."

"And we're not aligned with the federal military system?" asked Ling Lan in confusion. She cast a doubtful glance at the boys standing before her, poking fun at their backgrounds. She had learned about their family backgrounds after over a year of hanging out together. Qi Long, Han Jijyun, and Luo Lang were all descended from upper ranking federal military families.

The three boys couldn't help but laugh. Still chuckling, Qi Long retorted, "But Boss, you aren't! Whether or not we are aligned with the federal military system depends on your identity as our leader."

Ling Lan scratched her face in embarrassment. She wasn't sure whether she should tell them now that she was actually aligned with the federal military system after all... In the past, she had thought that with her father's death, that her family was just an extremely normal martyr's family, which would definitely have nothing to do with the federal military system. Therefore, she had told Han Jijyun and the others that she came from a middle-average family, and that her father had just been sacrificed in battle before she was born.

And so, back when Ling Lan had just discovered her father Ling Xiao's true identity, she had been very conflicted. She just didn't know how she could re-explain her identity to her companions now.

"You all want to accept Lin Zhong-qing?" Ling Lan wasn't a self-opinionated person. Although she didn't particularly like Lin Zhong-qing, she still decided that she would listen to what everyone had to say.

"Yeah, Lin Zhong-qing's potential is great, and he puts in a lot of effort into studying. His improvement is obvious — in the most recent ranking tournament, he managed to make it into the top 15. His future results shouldn't be too much off the mark. Boss, taking him in as a follower should bring us no disadvantages," analysed Han Jijyun.

"But we'll just have to go up against Li Yingjie's group." Ling Lan considered whether it was worth it to take on this troublesome issue for Lin Zhong-qing's sake.

"Isn't that pretty interesting? With no rivals, no competition, our improvement will be much slower," said Han Jijyun with a smile as he looked to one side; it was Li Yingjie and company. Right then, Han Jijyun's gaze was somewhat piercing, a little different from how it was usually.

A notion passed through Ling Lan's mind. While the innate talents of Qi Long, Luo Lang, and herself were geared towards combat, Han Jijyun's wasn't. His innate talent belonged to the intelligence stream; in other words, he could not rely solely on book-learning or fighting to increase his abilities, but had to clash wits often with others...

Ling Lan thought of her future plans — Han Jijyun was definitely one of the most integral links in the chain. Only if Han Jijyun became more capable would she be able to accomplish what she wanted to do perfectly.

So Ling Lan nodded and said, "Alright, I agree."

Chapter 120

Joining Officially!

Ling Lan's agreement caused the smile on Han Jijyun's face to deepen, and his gaze brightened even more. Perhaps Han Jijyun had found a game he wanted to play, and so his spirits were running high.

When Han Jijyun wasn't paying attention, Qi Long nudged Luo Lang lightly with a shoulder, and asked quietly, "Did your initiate instructor arrange some sort of mission?"

Luo Lang was startled, somewhat unable to wrap his mind around how sharp Qi Long's instincts were. This was because Qi Long always gave off a brash and forthright vibe, and seemed like he would be extremely careless. However, Luo Lang very quickly gathered his thoughts and nodded almost imperceptibly with a subtle dip of his chin, telling Qi Long that he had guessed correctly.

Qi Long grinned. Only he knew that he had guessed so easily, not because he was intuitive, but because his initiate instructor had also given him a mission. So, seeing Han Jijyun suddenly become so proactive, his mind connected the dots to his own situation, which was why he had jumped to this assumption so quickly.

"How about this? Let's leave Qi Long in charge of this matter." Ling Lan currently intended to cultivate Qi Long as the spokesperson for their team, wanting to put him in charge of representing their public image. This was because Qi Long's appearance was bright, lively and extremely positive, easily gaining the trust of others. In the future, no matter what mission they accepted, this disposition of his would be an unexpected boon when cooperating with others.

As Ling Lan had been trolled multiple times by the smiling faces of instructors Number Three and Number Five, she believed that people who smiled like they were kindly gentlemen were often representatives with 'black innards'¹, bellies filled with murky waters of deceit and evil intentions. Therefore, she wasn't particularly fond of that kind of smile. In addition, she had the utmost respect for Instructor Number One, and held Instructor Number Nine in high esteem — and these two people were classic 'slackface' representatives. This led her current expressions and speaking tone to

gradually shift infinitely closer towards the behavioural patterns of those two instructors. In Little Four's words, right now was the developmental phase of the slackface shota...

"Ah...?" Ling Lan's arrangement boggled Qi Long. What was he supposed to be in charge of?

"I'm saying that Lin Zhong-qing will be your attending follower. You'll be responsible for him." Since she would be pushing Qi Long to take centre stage, then it made sense for her to assign a lackey to him, right? Besides, Ling Lan had way too many secrets, which made it unsuitable for someone to keep following her around.

"Later, when you fight in the arena, you need to do your best, alright? Otherwise, you'll lose your follower..." Ling Lan patted Qi Long's shoulder in encouragement, and then washed her hands of the responsibility.

Yet, Qi Long didn't care about Ling Lan's unexplained transfer of duties to him; he was in excitement mode. As a battle freak, the moment he heard the words 'arena' and 'fight', his blood boiled, and he just wished he could rush over immediately to the stage to satisfy a little of his battle lust. Although that punk Li Yingjie was somewhat iffy in the way he handled things, his personal combat ability was not bad. Good enough to be Qi Long's opponent.

Meanwhile, Han Jijyun had already got hold of Lin Zhong-qing via communicator, and told him to meet them secretly in a small room they opened for private arena combat. As this type of combat was set as private, no one would be able to get into the room without entering the correct password. Since Han Jijyun was prepared to let Lin Zhong-qing join the team, he would have to teach Li Yingjie a lesson no matter what. In the process, he wanted to reap more benefits from Li Yingjie, so he couldn't let Li Yingjie find out that Lin Zhong-qing had already joined their team.

Very soon, Lin Zhong-qing entered the private combat room. When he entered, Lin Zhong-qing couldn't see anyone, but just as he was wondering if he got the wrong room, he saw Ling Lan and the others waiting for him in a corner of the room that had been in his blind spot. Out of worry that Lin Zhong-qing could have been followed, Han Jijyun had arranged it so that everyone was located within a blind spot when someone first enters the room. This would eliminate any chance of them being discovered by an unintended audience.

Seeing the door close, Ling Lan and the others walked out of the corner. Lin Zhong-qing carefully glanced at Ling Lan who was standing in the middle of the group, and waited for the final verdict.

Being able to join Ling Lan's team would undoubtedly be the best outcome for him. Ever since Ling Lan had helped him previously without even batting an eyelid, Lin Zhong-qing had been extremely grateful towards Ling Lan. Back then, he had already been conflicted — wondering if he should lower his head and ask to join Ling Lan's group directly so that he could be under their protection. But at that time, he had just qualified for the Central Scout Academy and had also managed to become a Special Class-A student in one go — his pride and personal drive was high; he didn't want to become someone else's tag-along. Moreover, he was confident that he could evade Li Yingjie's pressuring, and so the thought of joining Ling Lan's group came and went.

However, reality was cruel. His relationship with Li Yingjie became increasingly worse, until it reached the point where they were almost archenemies. Meanwhile, although he continued to improve, the more he learned, the more he could feel the distance between himself and the top 5 of Special Class-A. Ling Lan, Qi Long, Li Yingjie, Wu Jiong, and Ye Xu were the ironclad top 5. Their strength exceeded the other Class-A students by a significant margin; it could be said that no one was even close to threatening their positions.

Of the five, Ye Xu was the weakest. And while Li Yingjie and Wu Jiong were about equal in strength, Qi Long was overall stronger than them by a head. Needless to say, Ling Lan was the uncontested #1 in the minds of all the students of their year. Although he had never truly obtained the top rank, the fact that his follower Qi Long had successfully earned the top rank 3 years in a row just proved how fearsome he was.

In the intra-grade ranking fights, Lin Zhong-qing had fought against Ye Xu and Wu Jiong before. Against them, he had only managed to hold out for 50 to 60 moves. Deep down, Lin Zhong-qing knew that if the other had really used their sure-kill moves, he would never have been able to hold out for that long. He could perhaps hold out for half that number of moves. The sheer pressure brought on by the gap between their levels let Lin Zhong-qing lose without any resentment.

Compared to the other four people, Lin Zhong-qing was actually much more curious about Ling Lan. In fact, you could even say that he was brimming with questions. Before this, he had asked around in a roundabout way to find out more about Ling Lan's family background. He found out that Ling Lan was from a middle-class family,

and was also a posthumous child — while he had still been in his mother's womb, his father had lost his life in one of the Federation's battlefields. Aside from having a slightly better background, Ling Lan and he had rather similar conditions — they didn't have any additional combat skills, and didn't have access to any battle experience from their elders — then why did Ling Lan have such formidable battle power? Could it be a genetic issue? But they were just lower than Ling Lan by one level, so logically, the difference shouldn't be that large.

Lin Zhong-qing had also studied Ling Lan's fights before, and found that his battles were clean, precise, and efficient, never dragging things out (with only just one move used, there really was nothing to drag). Furthermore, his every attack was neither so strong that it was unstoppable, nor so fast that it was invisible. A simple straightforward move, without any extraneous frills or flourishes, directly aimed to strike at his opponent's biggest weakness.

Of course, he himself was very familiar with those attack moves Ling Lan had used — they were all sourced from the basic physical skills set of the Central Scout Academy, with only some being sure-kill techniques appropriated from other students.

Originally, Lin Zhong-qing hadn't known this. But then one time, he noticed Qin Yi's sure-kill technique being executed perfectly by Ling Lan's hands, letting him defeat Ye Xu in one move. Then, he had known that Ling Lan had the unbelievable ability to rapidly mimic and absorb others' sure-kill techniques. This had also given him some insight on how Ling Lan could have become so strong.

Ling Lan didn't have a formidable family background, nor did he have any additional combat skills (or so he thought; yet another poor babe being kept in the dark). And yet, he had become the number 1 of their year — Lin Zhong-qing truly respected and admired Ling Lan from the heart. He felt that Ling Lan had brought honour to all the students from common family backgrounds. The only regret he had, was that Ling Lan was very aloof — not seeming to care very much for the students around him. Aside from those few people from the start, after a whole year, it was still those few people who were close to him.

Then, this time, he had unexpectedly fallen into a trap and was now forced to fight against Li Yingjie directly. Lin Zhong-qing knew that he was no match for Li Yingjie, but he was unwilling to just roll over and become Li Yingjie's subordinate. And so, he had thought of Ling Lan. If he really had to submit and become someone's subordinate, then he would much rather become Ling Lan's subordinate. Even though Wu Jiong was

also a good candidate, Lin Zhong-qing wasn't as keen to submit to Wu Jiong.

Thus, he had taken the initiative to contact Han Jijyun online and put forward his request. He had thought that he would feel horrible doing it — after all, he had fought hard for independence for over a year, but still couldn't escape the tragic outcome of becoming a follower. The only consolation he had was that at least contacting Han Jijyun to submit to Ling Lan was his own choice. However, unexpectedly, the moment the words left his mouth, he had actually felt at peace. His heart seemed lighter, as if shedding a heavy weight ². Perhaps he had already been thinking about this for a long time subconsciously, but his pride and ego had not allowed him to consider it consciously.

Now, Lin Zhong-qing had come to face the person that could determine his future destiny. His initially steady heart actually started fluttering in panic — goddammit, he was actually nervous! And there were also feelings of fear; he was really afraid of being rejected...

"Lin Zhong-qing, I have agreed to your request. But I'm used to acting alone, so, after this, you can just follow Qi Long and the others." Ling Lan's words brought both joy and pain to Lin Zhong-qing's heart. The joy was because he could finally join Ling Lan's team and receive their protection; the pain was because he had heard Ling Lan's rejection. Ling Lan wasn't taking him on as a follower personally, but handing him over to Qi Long and the others.

Who knew there would come a day where he would be dismissed by another as a follower? Lin Zhong-qing didn't know how to feel — he merely nodded his head in a daze to indicate that he understood.

Only the team leader could request the addition of a team member; an individual wasn't able to randomly search for a team and request to join on their own. So, when Ling Lan saw Lin Zhong-qing nod his acceptance, as the team leader, she used her communicator to connect to the academy's mainframe, and submitted the request form for Lin Zhong-qing to enter her team. Once the request was approved, the A.I. would contact the team member listed on the form. Next, the team member need only enter the password of his communicator to complete the process and join the team.

The A.I. very quickly checked Lin Zhong-qing's information to confirm that he was currently a free agent. Then, it forwarded Ling Lan's invitation to Lin Zhong-qing's communicator.

Lin Zhong-qing took a deep breath — he then resolutely pressed on the 'confirm' button and entered his password. When he saw the congratulatory message confirming his addition to Ling Lan's team, Lin Zhong-qing let out a large breath. It felt to him as if the dust had truly settled and he was back on solid ground. He hid it well though; no one else in the room noticed.

"Qi Long, I leave the arena battle to you." Ling Lan had simultaneously received a notification informing her of the successful addition, along with a copy of all of Lin Zhong-qing's data. As a team, they were considered as one entity, so all the team members' information was publicly available within the group. Meanwhile, any grudges on Lin Zhong-qing's shoulders would also be extended to encompass the whole team. In other words, any of the other team members could substitute for Lin Zhong-qing in the upcoming fight. This logic was exactly the same as the one behind Li Yingjie's plot to trap Lin Zhong-qing into a fight.

Chapter 121

Battle Points for Self-Redemption!

This was the first time in the last couple of years that a nemesis combat match was to be held in the Central Scout Academy. Lin Zhong-qing and Li Yingjie's wager on their futures created an uproar among the lower grades; this was also why there were so many people here in the combat hall today.

Li Yingjie had long taken up his position on the stage, waiting for Lin Zhong-qing to arrive. At this moment, he was very pleased with himself, thinking that Lin Zhong-qing was already a bird in his hand. All that remained was for the final result to be declared — Li Yingjie was extremely confident that he would be able to take down Lin Zhong-qing easily with his strength.

The more Li Yingjie thought about it, the more excited he was — he could almost see Lin Zhong-qing bowing down before him now...

However, the following events did not unfold as he had pictured. In the final minute before the arena battle would officially start, the person that appeared across from him was not Lin Zhong-qing, but Qi Long. Right then, Li Yingjie knew that his plot had been countered by the opponent, and he screamed in anger, "Why is it you?!"

Qi Long laughed freely, saying, "Why can't it be me?" In Li Yingjie's eyes, Qi Long's hearty laughter was a taunt, mocking him for falling victim to his own cleverness.

"Who'd have thought that Lin Zhong-qing would be your team member... I'd never expected you all to be willing to waste a member slot for that fellow." In Li Yingjie's plans, after he had defeated Lin Zhong-qing, the first thing he would do would be to forbid him from joining any teams. Since Lin Zhong-qing had been so unwilling to submit to him, then he would utterly destroy him and turn Lin Zhong-qing into a lowly dog for Li Yingjie to kick and scold as he pleased!

"You yourself were willing to let a regular class person join your team. At least Lin Zhong-qing is still a Special Class-A student. It's not at all shameful to have taken him in." Qi Long was rather perplexed by Li Yingjie's words. Right now, no matter how he looked at Li Yingjie, he just felt that there was something wrong with the other's brain.

Really, what was he thinking? The members of a team were supposed to be the best partners to grow up with, and would be the most intimate companions who would fight right by one's side in the future.

Therefore, every team leader would be more careful than careful, weighing their options again and again, when deciding whether to accept someone into their team. Li Yingjie's act of adding a weak member who would obviously drag down the strength of a team, all for the sake of revenge against someone who didn't want to join him... in Qi Long's opinion, this sort of behaviour was illogical. It was definitely the action of a retard.

Qi Long's words further ignited Li Yingjie's rage — there was only one notion in his mind now, and that was that he had fallen prey to Ling Lan's team's evil scheme. He believed that this was all a ploy set up by Ling Lan's group to eliminate their greatest rival (him) so that they could obtain the coveted status of kings of year 4738.

It had to be said that Li Yingjie was really full of himself. He had always thought of Ling Lan's group as his competition, so the moment he found that the situation wasn't looking good for him, his first conclusion was that he had been set up.

Dizzy with rage, Li Yingjie could no longer remain calm. The moment the referee teacher said start, he charged with bloodshot eyes towards Qi Long on the opposite end. Of course, this manner of approach was useless — already weaker than Qi Long in general, after losing his composure, the difference between Li Yingjie's and Qi Long's strength was even clearer. Within the span of a few moves, Li Yingjie was being dominated by Qi Long on every front.

A slight smile appeared on Ling Lan's lips; this match was already Qi Long's.

In a corner not too far from the arena stage, Wu Jiong, who had been observing the fight, snuffed coldly at this point and said, "Ye Xu, let's go."

"Yes!" replied Ye Xu, nodding. Even at their level, they could tell what the final outcome of the fight would be. Initially, they had been looking forward to seeing the fight between Li Yingjie and Qi Long, but who would've guessed that Li Yingjie would become mentally imbalanced and lose his calm? Hence, the fight had lost all meaning, making them lose interest in it as well.

Wu Jiong and Ye Xu had actually come to spectate for a specific purpose — they too had wanted to invite Lin Zhong-qing to join their team. Although Lin Zhong-qing was currently only ranked 15th in the class rankings, seemingly not too strong, the fact is that he had successfully moved up from the position of dead-last to the upper segment of Class-A in just short of 2 years. If Lin Zhong-qing continued to improve at this rate, he would certainly be able to make a true place for himself among those at the top one day. Wu Jiong and Ye Xu both thought highly of his future prospects, so they were willing to give one of their precious team member slots to Lin Zhong-qing.

Of course, Wu Jiong and Ye Xu also believed that as long as Lin Zhong-qing was willing to join them, if they negotiated politely with Li Yingjie based on their families' status in the military world, the other would probably give way.

However, Wu Jiong hadn't considered that Ling Lan would beat them to the punch... Wu Jiong felt a twinge of regret in his heart, thinking that he had lost this chess match by a slim margin. He had wanted to wait till Lin Zhong-qing had utterly lost all hope before offering a helping hand — that way, he would have been able to gain Lin Zhong-qing's gratitude — but unexpectedly, Ling Lan's group had stepped in halfway and hijacked his target. If he had only known earlier, he would not have waited to try and maximise his advantages. He should have just contacted Lin Zhong-qing directly the moment he had found out about Li Yingjie's trap...

"That punk Qi Long really moves too goddamn quickly. Actually beating us to the punch to get Lin Zhong-qing," complained Ye Xu, displeased, as he stared at Qi Long dominating the match.

"Qi Long? That punk is just a battle maniac, he wouldn't think that far. Without that person, Lin Zhong-qing would never have chosen to join them." Gaze serious, Wu Jiong directed Ye Xu's attention to Ling Lan who was standing in a corner.

"Ling Lan..." Ye Xu's expression changed subtly. He still remembered when he had first been defeated by Ling Lan in one move — that one incident had almost destroyed his confidence. Luckily, Wu Jiong had found him, and they had bonded while commiserating together over their losses to Ling Lan. The two of them began working together, and finally managed to build a team of their own, becoming one of the only three teams in their grade at present. This also allowed their reputation to stay on par with Ling Lan's team, taking on the role as a sort of counterbalance.

As for Li Yingjie's team, in their eyes, it wasn't even a threat. It was really only Li Yingjie

himself who blindly believed that his team was one of the strongest teams in the class...

At the heart of it, Wu Jiong actually looked down a little on Li Yingjie. He was a direct descendant of a top elite family, but though his combat ability was not bad, that brain of his... was really below Wu Jiong's notice. He just kept doing a bunch of nonsensical things that did neither himself nor anyone else any good.

Wu Jiong's group quietly disappeared from the combat hall. Meanwhile, on the stage, the results were quickly decided. Li Yingjie, who could fight against Qi Long for up to several 100 moves typically, did not display any of the strength a top 5 of Class-A should have this time. It hadn't taken even 100 moves before he was struck by one of Qi Long's fists and flew off the stage, sealing his loss.

After Li Yingjie lost, two options popped out on his communicator — one was to adhere to the wager and serve the other, while the other was to redeem himself by using battle points to trade for his freedom.

Based on Li Yingjie's personality, he would certainly choose to redeem himself, but before he could make his choice, he had fainted out of sheer anger.

Because Li Yingjie had lost the ability to choose, after 3 minutes, the academy's mainframe automatically transferred that right to Qi Long, allowing him to make the choice on behalf of Li Yingjie.

If Qi Long chose the first option, he would have to send out an invitation for his team, while the second option would require the loser to forfeit a set number of battle points to redeem himself.

Of course Qi Long was unwilling to take on this trash Li Yingjie; he hurriedly chose for Li Yingjie to redeem himself. And then, all he saw was the immense figure supplied by the A.I. — the countless number of zeroes made Qi Long's eyes cross. It turned out that Li Yingjie was worried that Lin Zhong-qing would choose to redeem himself, and so had set it so that the price for self-redemption was one million battle points. This was an absolutely astronomical number. For context, despite Qi Long's battle achievements, in these two years at the academy, he had only managed to earn slightly more than a thousand battle points.

In truth, Li Yingjie had already proposed this self-redemption price right from the

beginning when he had challenged Lin Zhong-qing to a nemesis match. This way, no matter which option Lin Zhong-qing chose, he wouldn't be able to escape his palm. If Lin Zhong-qing chose the second option, he would use the debt of these battle points to force Lin Zhong-qing to give up his studies and work non-stop in the virtual world by taking on missions to repay his debt. (The scout academy's battle points can be traded using the credits earned within the virtual world.)

However, this malicious intent of Li Yingjie's had now smashed his own toes, benefitting Qi Long. This was also another reason why Li Yingjie had fainted — he knew what the price of self-redemption was, and even he could not bear the cost.

Very quickly, a message was sent to Qi Long's communicator, informing him that a batch of battle points under Li Yingjie's name had been transferred into his account. The mainframe also told Qi Long that the remaining deficiency would be automatically transferred to his account whenever Li Yingjie earned more battle points in the future. In other words, even without taking Li Yingjie in as a lackey, Li Yingjie would have to work for Qi Long until the day he graduated from the Central Scout Academy.

Just like that, Li Yingjie was forced to take a great loss. On the other hand, Lin Zhong-qing managed to get rid of a burden that had troubled him for close to 2 years. However, Qi Long very quickly received the remaining battle points from Li Yingjie, clearing the debt. Qi Long knew very well that this was most likely the doing of Li Yingjie's family. They must have applied pressure in the background to allow the direct transfer of credits into Li Yingjie's virtual account so that he could trade them for battle points to clear his debt.

Although the academy had announced to the public that it was impossible to obtain credits from the outside world, when real power and authority came into play, the academy would still give some face to the extremely resourceful large elite families. Qi Long was clear about the twists and turns involved in this, so he wasn't particularly surprised to receive the payment for Li Yingjie's debt so quickly. He merely told Ling Lan and Han Jijyun about the amount he of battle points he received. In the end, Ling Lan decided that she would leave 100,000 points for emergencies, while the rest would be left to Han Jijyun to handle. Hopefully, this large windfall would be able to give them a boost within the scout academy's virtual world. Of course, the greatest objective of Ling Lan's group was to free all the members of the team from the worry of purchasing developmental agents.

Battle points were very useful — you could use them in the academy to buy the

highest-grade cultivation agents, which were extremely hard to find in the outside world, as well as high-grade gene agents. However, the price was extremely steep — 100,000 battle points for just one tube. Even if the children of the academy worked their butts off doing missions and pushed their hardest during the arena battles, they would still need at least 5 years before they would accumulate 100,000 battle points.

Qi Long's current amount of battle points could only purchase 10 tubes of high-grade gene agent, and this number was only enough to supply Qi Long for one year of absorption. Ling Lan felt that buying these agents now was rather not worth it — they might as well try to think of a way to gain some interest on these battle points and earn more. The more they earned, the more agents they would be able to get.

Han Jijyun felt the same way and so accepted the duty graciously. He was filled with vigour, thinking that this sort of purposeful life right now was what he really wanted. Everyone left to do their own things, leaving only Little Four to continue muttering by Ling Lan's ear. He was whining that he would have been a better candidate than Han Jijyun to handle those battle points.

Chapter 122

The Cheetah Mecha Operator!

In the end, Ling Lan couldn't take Little Four's incessant whining, so she had no choice but to let him take the remaining 100,000 battle points she had saved for emergencies to invest. Of course, Ling Lan warned him beforehand that if he lost the battle points, she would pull down his pants and give him a good spanking, lifting the ban on domestic violence this once.

Little Four naturally sniffed at this, thinking that Ling Lan's threat would never have a chance to happen. In his words — have you ever seen a god lose money? What? You said yes? Then you must definitely be a retard!

Ling Lan definitely did not want to be called a retard, so, after she gave the 100,000 battle points to Little Four, she gave the matter no more thought. Of course, Ling Lan was mentally prepared — if the battle points were really lost, then she would make Little Four take a little risk and transfer some credits in from the outside world to repay the debt. As a boss, she needed to be accountable to her followers, after all.

After Ling Lan had settled all the real-world matters, she continued to focus on training up her mecha control. Time was slowly ticking by, getting closer to the final deadline, but Ling Lan just couldn't break past the critical 3-minute line. In other words, Ling Lan had pushed till she could use her highest hand speed without making any control errors, but unfortunately, her time had stopped around 3 minutes and 30 seconds. Even in her best condition, her best results were only infinitely nearing 3 minutes 20 seconds — the distance to 3 minutes was just too far away...

Once control hits a critical threshold, it was virtually impossible to improve the time needed by even just one second. Ling Lan could almost predict the failure of this mission already; the memories of numbing pain of her body being electrocuted reared up from the depths of her mind, and she couldn't help but tremble a little.

Ling Lan became more and more anxious, which negatively impacted her training results in her following sessions. This feeling was just like when she had reached a bottleneck previously with her father's hand speed training. Ling Lan thought to herself — could this really already be her limit? Was she actually unsuited for piloting

mecha?

This mental state of Ling Lan was unsuitable for mecha control training; the picky learning space ruthlessly kicked Ling Lan out of the training area.

Little Four, who had been busy earning battle points, sensed his boss's glum mood, and quickly put down what he was doing to come and ask her why. When he heard that she had encountered a bottleneck once again, he again suggested taking Ling Lan to the outside virtual world for a trip for a change of pace.

Ling Lan felt that just staying in the mission space wouldn't solve her problem anyway, and her training results recently had just been getting worse and worse — she might as well go outside for a bit. Then, she recalled that it was only after she had first learned some mecha control in the outside virtual world that the learning space's mecha course had been unlocked. Perhaps the answer to her breakthrough would also be in outside virtual world.

Just like that, Ling Lan and Little Four once again returned to the place where they had logged off the first time, inside the mecha training hall.

However, at this time today, there were quite a few newbies training at the mecha training hall. Inside the room Ling Lan had selected, there were also seven to eight bestial mecha practising their basic movements. There were powerful agile fierce bestial mecha, such as a panther, a tiger, and a lion, as well as tough offensive type mecha with sharp horns or protrusions, such as a porcupine, a stegosaurus, and a rhinoceros. Of course, there were also nimble scout type mecha, such as a wolf and a fox.

They were all in the middle of practising the basic movements of their mecha. Some were doing like Ling Lan previously, stumbling around; this was obviously their first time here, making them the newbies of newbie operators. There were also some who had trained for some time, who displayed a certain level of control, marking them as older newbies.

The moment Ling Lan entered the room, most of the bestial mecha inside stopped moving or slowed down. This was because Ling Lan's mecha was the extremely rare rabbit mecha, highly uncommon on the market. On top of that, the resting state action Ling Lan had set was just too adorable — the rabbit was nibbling at the red carrot¹ held between its forelegs, head twitching slightly. Its cute appearance coupled with its

cute actions naturally drew the crowd's attention.

Ling Lan had set the resting action of the mecha this way on a whim. Originally, she had thought that this action would never be seen by anyone else, and so had purposely set it to be cuter for her own entertainment. But she hadn't known that her first visit to the mecha training hall had been a special circumstance. Back then, most people had been drawn away to watch the mecha fight in the battle stadium, so there hadn't been many people staying behind to practise in the hall. Thus, she had ended up being the only person in the room.

Although Ling Lan was rather surprised that there were so many mecha training together here, she didn't really think too much about it. Though the resting action of the rabbit mecha was rather adorably silly, no one would be able to tell who was operating it anyway. Ling Lan did not think that she would be so unlucky to get a rabbit mecha again when she used her real identity to log on in the future...

In the training hall, there was one cheetah mecha which completely ignored Ling Lan's arrival. His actions remained the same as he continued to go about his training systematically and meticulously. Ling Lan's attention was quickly drawn to the other, because he was controlling that mecha perfectly. Whether it was running, jumping, leaping, or pouncing, every movement was clean and precise. When executed in sequence, the actions were agile and flowed smoothly, bringing an aesthetic beauty where power merged flawlessly with speed. This even gave Ling Lan the illusion that the mecha before her was no longer a mecha, but actually a real live giant cheetah.

Ling Lan's attention also drew Little Four's attention. He surreptitiously looked in on the operator of the cheetah mecha, and upon seeing that familiar figure, he couldn't help but exclaim in surprise, shaking Ling Lan from her mesmerised stupor. "*What happened? Little Four?*"

Little Four said excitedly, "*Haha, Boss, we've bumped into an acquaintance. Guess who the operator inside the cheetah mecha is?*"

"How would I know? This is only my second time in this virtual world, so I don't really know that many people... could it be someone from real life?" mused Ling Lan, rubbing her chin.

"No, we met this person on our last trip, Boss. You even talked to the other. Here's a hint: the other is very dangerous..." said Little Four with a cheeky grin, shaking his right

index finger.

Ling Lan figured it out abruptly. "*That hacker with spectre abilities?*" He had been the only one who fit the definition of dangerous.

"Haha, Boss, you got it! It's him. Who knew his mecha control is also so good... but why is he still practising basic mecha control here? Could it be that his age isn't as old as we thought?" said Little Four, wondering. Back then, although the man had concealed his appearance, he had given off an impression of being a mature adult. Could it be that they had been fooled?

"What, is there an age limit for someone to learn basic mecha control?" asked Ling Lan curiously.

"Well, no, there isn't. It's just that most learners are around age 13 to 16; even the oldest wouldn't be as old as 18. That's why I find it a little odd. The feeling that man gave us is that he should already be over 20, right?" replied Little Four. *"But then he's a hacker-evolved spectre, so it could be that he had manipulated his aura."*

"If only Boss had let me investigate his real appearance, then we wouldn't have been fooled." Little Four still seemed to still hold some resentment over the matter.

"Leave it, let's avoid trouble if we can. He has nothing to do with us, why should we know so much about him?" Ling Lan then reassured Little Four, *"Still, this person's mecha control skills are really impressive. Looks like I should go reference the control methods of some mecha experts. Perhaps then I'll be able to find some inspiration to break through."*

Ling Lan felt that she had been building a car in a sealed room ²for too long. Training on her own day after day, she had taken many of the control moves for granted, becoming set in her ways. Especially after seeing the way the cheetah mecha operator controlled his mecha, Ling Lan deeply realised that she still had some unnecessary frills for some of her moves — she had overcomplicated things a little.

"Oh, it looks like he's going to take the basic movement assessment mission now. Let's go see." Little Four didn't wait for Ling Lan's response, dragging Ling Lan and her mecha along to follow the other into the assessment mission's space.

"Is it alright for us to just enter like this?" asked Ling Lan somewhat worriedly as she glanced at the cheetah mecha who was preparing to take the assessment. After all, the

other was an evolved spectre who could kill brainwaves. If the other had already set it so that viewing was restricted, wouldn't their barging in here be taken as an outright challenge? If things took a turn for the worst, heads would roll.

"No worries, this type of assessment mission is open for public viewing. Anyone can choose to watch. Many people like to watch others take the assessment before taking the assessment themselves so that they can absorb some experience," said Little Four breezily.

Little Four's answer let Ling Lan relax completely. She then took a look around, and noticed that she was the only one here observing. This made her suspect whether Little Four had just been shooting off his mouth again...

However, seeing the other ignore her presence, Ling Lan decided that it wouldn't hurt. Even if Little Four had been lying to her, she had no way to go out anymore anyway because the assessment mission had already started.

Inside the assessment mission, the entire space was filled with all kinds of messy and disorganised obstacles. The cheetah mecha was weaving among the obstacles, no trace of hesitation or awkwardness in its movements. All of its actions flowed naturally, no observable kinks at all.

Just as Ling Lan was thinking that the other would easily pass the mission this time, the initially stationary obstacles began to move irregularly. This sudden change shocked Ling Lan, and also flustered the cheetah mecha operator.

A rock column suddenly burst out of the ground — the cheetah mecha had just leapt into the air, and it looked like he was about to collide with the column. Right then, the cheetah mecha twisted so that its four limbs could spring off the rock column, and with this force, the mecha's body was sent leaping in another direction, nicely evading a collision with the column.

Ling Lan's high-strung nerves eased slightly, but the following situation made her heart rise into her throat again. It turned out that the cheetah mecha had not escaped from danger yet — though it had changed directions, a giant rock was hurtling towards him from the other direction.

The operator of the cheetah mecha was very calm. He controlled the mecha to shift movements in mid-air; the mecha's four limbs shuddered twice in the air and then

stepped firmly on the giant rock. Borrowing this force, it bounced back, once again dodging a potentially dangerous collision.

Chapter 123

Breaking Through a Bottleneck!

The cheetah mecha changed direction repeatedly in mid-air, springing from one obstacle to another; it actually managed to stay in the air without having to set foot on the ground even once. Using multiple rebounds, he weaved his way nimbly through the air, jumping over wave after unending wave of obstacles. Without any real danger, he lasted till the final point, passing this assessment mission perfectly.

"Congratulations, XXX, for graduating the basic mecha controls course with a result of 1 minute 57 seconds. This record has been entered into the top 1000 of the elite leaderboard." A line of red text appeared suddenly on the screen of Ling Lan's mecha. This proved that the other's speed was indeed exceptional.

"Wow, Amazing. This result of his actually placed him within the top 1000 of the elite leaderboard, and this is his first attempt too!" Little Four's words stunned Ling Lan once more. Mind you, the other's control ability is something not even she — with the learning space she possessed, and the tenfold extra practice time she had because of it — could do. And the other had just accomplished it so easily...

"Could it be that he has suppressed his previous passing results?" Ling Lan felt her own confidence take a big hit, and recalling that the other was an evolved spectre, capable of manipulating data in the virtual world, she wondered if the other had applied some subterfuge here.

"I checked. He really didn't." Little Four's words informed Ling Lan that the other's result was a true one. This fired up Ling Lan's motivation — this time, she really felt the difference between herself and a true aberrant-level prodigy of this world. Having no true rivals that could match up to her in the Central Scout Academy had made her slacken, but this event made her draw taut the reins of hard work once more, setting her firmly on the road of the strong.

"He's really amazing. Who knows how well I can do?" Competitive spirit flared in Ling Lan's heart. She had always been the boss at the academy, so suddenly having someone be better than her had made her eager to test herself.

"Why don't you try for yourself, Boss?" Little Four was obviously a troublemaker; sensing her restlessness, he immediately started goading Ling Lan.

It was true that Ling Lan wanted to know what level her basic control skills were at, so she went along with Little Four's suggestion and chose to take the basic controls assessment mission.

Ling Lan felt herself being transported into a spacious area. This area was different from the assessment area of the cheetah mecha previously.

"Every assessment map is chosen randomly. Word has it that there are over 100,000 maps, so it is virtually impossible to prepare for the assessment by researching the maps beforehand. This also guarantees that the result of every assessment is valid and reliable," said Little Four, explaining why the map was different.

"Since the maps are different, then why do they still rank people based on time? Among these hundred thousand maps, there must be some levels which are harder or easier than others," said Ling Lan doubtfully.

"The difficulty level of all the maps is equal. The controls being assessed on each map are about the same so that the operator's true abilities are reflected in the results. For instance, the operator of that cheetah mecha earlier finished his map in 1 minute 57 seconds; then, he would also finish this map in almost the same amount of time. The deviation won't exceed one second, give or take."

Ling Lan nodded to show she understood. She saw a timer appear on the screen of the mecha counting down to the start of the test. This method of informing was much more humane than that of the learning space — after all, the system here gave you some prep time, unlike the learning space, which would start whenever it felt like it. Every start would just sneak up without warning, leaving Ling Lan feeling helpless.

Seeing two large letters 'GO' appear, Ling Lan controlled her rabbit mecha to bound off at flying speed. The fully engaged Ling Lan didn't know that, at this time, a familiar mecha had slipped into her assessment mission space. It was that cheetah mecha, the evolved spectre who Ling Lan had always considered extremely dangerous.

It turned out that the cheetah mecha had been fully aware of Ling Lan's presence during his assessment. However, Ling Lan's mecha had really just seemed so harmless, and its behaviour of nibbling on a carrot had been so amusing, that the cheetah

mecha's operator couldn't help but chuckle, curiosity towards the operator of such a cute mecha stealing into his mind.

He saw that the rabbit mecha was simply observing quietly, and so left it alone. When his assessment ended, seeing the notification messages from the system, he was also very moved and satisfied. By the time his emotions settled and he was about to select the option to graduate and leave the mecha training hall, he unintentionally noticed that Ling Lan's rabbit mecha had chosen to take the assessment mission as well. Curious, he didn't choose to graduate, but instead chose the option to return for more training, and so was sent back to the mecha training hall. Then, he had entered this space to watch Ling Lan's assessment.

Of course, this choice meant that he would have to retake the basic assessment again once more later on, but he didn't care. After all, for him, passing the assessment was really a simple matter.

Little Four had noticed the other from the very moment he entered to observe, but Little Four chose not to inform Ling Lan. This was because Little Four didn't think the other could influence them in any way. Even if the other was an evolved spectre, Little Four believed all along that the virtual world was his territory — no one would be able to harm Ling Lan under his watch.

In order to let the rabbit mecha manoeuvre freely without any burden, Ling Lan shifted the carrot, which had initially been on the rabbit's back, to its mouth and clamped down to hold it between its teeth. After that, a giant rabbit could be seen hopping around nimbly within that vast space, dodging one obstacle after another.

There was sufficient room for Ling Lan's mecha to prance around freely — this allowed Ling Lan to pay less attention to those obstacles. At this moment, Ling Lan was unleashing the fastest speed she could handle for the rabbit mecha to run; in other words, her hand speed had already reached its highest point at present.

"What great speed. Their hand speed is most likely already at a high level. Who knew planet Azure had such an amazing youth... is it an academy student? If it is an academy student, then who could it be? Is it a supreme prodigy who managed to beat the trial to remove their virtual access lock at only age 13?" The cheetah mecha operator wondered to himself in awe as he watched the rabbit mecha's speed. In his mind, he was going through the people he knew to try and figure out who the rabbit mecha operator could be among those on planet Azure.

Frankly, the cheetah mecha couldn't be blamed for not considering the other planets. This was because the newbies in the mecha training hall were either the freshest of newbies, those who had just gained access to the extended virtual world, or students from the scout academies who had succeeded in their challenge. Either way, they were the type with no money who wouldn't be able to afford the exorbitant fees for a transfer. Therefore, if they wanted to learn about mecha, they would definitely go to the local mecha training hall for training, and not choose to transfer to another planet.

Just like that, due to a misunderstanding, the cheetah mecha operator was never able to find the operator of the rabbit mecha. Only when he went to military school later on did he manage to find some hints.

Some of Ling Lan's high-speed turns left the cheetah mecha operator in awe, but also with some regret. *"Hmm, it looks like there are some minor flaws in accuracy, but at this speed, this performance is already impeccable."* The cheetah mecha operator's operator knew very well that, the faster the speed, the more difficult it was to control the mecha. Certain turning motions, which could be executed within perfect range at low speed, would become extremely difficult at high speeds. Typically, as long as a set movement can be completed at high speed, then it would already be considered an excellent performance.

Ling Lan's performance in the first half was basically perfect, but the latter half of the assessment wasn't that easy. Just when Ling Lan was enjoying her run, the difficult section arrived — it turned out that she had reached the part with the irregularly moving obstacles. Even though Ling Lan already knew these obstacles existed, they came on so suddenly that she was still thrown for a bit of a loop.

This was because these moving obstacles arrived so abruptly, and they moved without any sense of predictability.

Ling Lan was in the midst of sprinting when she saw a large rock hurtling towards her from her left side with the corner of her eye. At that speed, Ling Lan knew well that it would soon smash into her mecha's waist.

In a split second, Ling Lan decided — she rejected the option of an emergency stop, because she knew that once her mecha stopped, she wouldn't be able to increase its speed to this level again. This was because there was no longer any space here for her

to slowly increase her mecha's speed. Her only option now was to break through with pure speed.

Ling Lan's decision was the same as the cheetah mecha's — progress by leaping from obstacle to obstacle. The thrusters on both sides of Ling Lan's mecha's waist activated at the same time. Borrowing the force of the thrusters, the mecha's speed was again raised by a whole level.

But the large rock was just coming at her too quickly — even though Ling Lan had increased the speed of her mecha by a hair with the help of her thrusters, she still only managed to push half of the mecha's body out of the path of the incoming rock. The rabbit mecha's hind legs were still within range of the rock's trajectory.

"Is he going to fail here?" The cheetah mecha operator frowned, because at this moment, there was already no possible way for the rabbit mecha operator to dodge anymore. However, right then, the rabbit mecha's next move sent a sparkle through his eyes, and he couldn't help but yell out in admiration.

The rabbit mecha had done something completely unexpected. With a sudden shake of its hind legs, the rabbit mecha had bent its hind legs back till a right angle ¹ was formed between its waist and its hind legs. Because of this bizarre move, the large rock had just barely grazed by the rabbit mecha's hind legs. On top of that, the mecha's raised hind legs pushed off abruptly against the large rock passing by, making an extremely terrifying loud noise. And this push sent the rabbit mecha zooming forwards at three times its original high speed.

If the instructors of the learning space had seen this move, they would have all exclaimed that this was the secret combat skill Rabbit Sky Leap.

This move had been inspired by the abilities of a rabbit, but was actually unsuitable to be used in conjunction with the rabbit mecha. However, in this last scene, Ling Lan had been forced into a corner, and had involuntarily used this move. Of course, being able to execute the move so nimbly with the rabbit mecha was all thanks to the hard work Ling Lan had put into her basic mecha control training in the learning space. She had already absorbed those basic mecha controls into her very instincts. Thus, in that critical moment, she had been able to take out this move, helping her to escape this desperate situation.

However, Ling Lan's crisis wasn't over yet. The added power of the Rabbit Sky Leap

made the mecha's speed go beyond the limits of what Ling Lan could safely control. Meanwhile, the obstacles also became faster to match the increased speed of the mecha, becoming even more erratic and strange in their movements, leaving Ling Lan scrambling to stay in control.

Seated within the rabbit mecha, Ling Lan was already drenched in sweat. She peered intently at all the images being displayed inside the mecha, dodging every obstacle that came from heaven knows where. Unknowingly, her hand speed had actually broken past her bottleneck, becoming faster and faster, at times even producing several afterimages, something which had never happened before.

Chapter 124

Don't Choose to Graduate?

"Warning, because the mecha used an irregular movement, some damage has occurred, some damage has occurred." Right then, the rabbit mecha's A.I. sounded out a warning.

Ling Lan was currently fully immersed in her mecha control; she ordered calmly, "Check damage level of mecha."

"Mecha damage at 30%. Warning, still sustaining damage. Please decrease speed by 50% immediately... damage at 31%... please decrease speed by 50%!" The A.I. repeated its warnings mechanically.

"How much longer can it hold on?" Ling Lan didn't choose to decrease her speed. For one, the speed of the moving obstacles around her no longer allowed her to decrease her mecha's speed. And secondly, her current speed was from the rebound energy of the Rabbit Sky Leap — the mecha itself had no way to control this speed anyway. Reality made it so that Ling Lan had no choice but to continue moving at high speed.

"Estimated that after 2 minutes, the mecha shall enter breakdown condition. Warning, damage level at 31%, please reduce speed by 50% immediately."

"That's enough time." To prevent the warning sounds of the A.I. from affecting her control, Ling Lan simply turned off the A.I.'s vocalization. Her expression calm, she once again controlled her mecha to evade the continuous ambush of the obstacles.

It had to be said that Ling Lan's adaptive ability was at an abnormal level — this had always been one of Ling Lan's strongest innate talents, and combined with the study and training provided by the learning space, this talent improved even more, its effects becoming even more obvious. After dodging somewhat clumsily for the first few abrupt attacks, Ling Lan got used to the mecha's present speed.

Very quickly, yet another horizontal wooden beam suddenly swept out from left to right, Ling Lan controlled the mecha to push off another obstacle once more to fly into the air, dodging it cleanly. This time, the movement seemed to flow easily, with no sign

of the previous fumbling. Not only that, Ling Lan controlled the mecha with pinpoint accuracy to twist so it could step on the flying wooden beam, and pushing off it, she made the mecha fly forwards once more like a cannonball.

"That adaptive ability is really abnormal. Only after adjusting 3 or 4 times, he has already grasped hold of the mecha's new speed and the ability to leverage force." The cheetah mecha operator was similarly amazed by Ling Lan's insane level of ability.

Sure enough, Ling Lan's subsequent performance was just as the cheetah mecha operator expected — the airborne rabbit mecha's leaps were never again as flustered as it had been at the start, moving with ease and grace to spare. In the end, Ling Lan safely completed the assessment mission.

"Congratulations, 40, for graduating the basic mecha controls course with a result of 1 minute 58 seconds. This record has been entered into the top 1000 of the elite leaderboard." A line of flashing green text suddenly appeared on Ling Lan's mecha's screen. Right below it, an option appeared soon after — Name: Reveal/Hide.

Ling Lan immediately chose the option to hide, and then a line of red text appeared on the highest section of the mecha's screen. It was just like the text which had appeared when the cheetah mecha had completed his test: "Congratulations, XXX, for graduating the basic mecha controls course with a result of 1 minute 58 seconds. This record has been entered into the top 1000 of the elite leaderboard."

"Slower than me by one second, and also on his first assessment as well! As expected, gifted mecha operators exist everywhere. Even here on this small planet of Azure, there is someone whose talent is equal to mine." A sense of threat welled up in the cheetah mecha operator's heart — he would never forget the words his grandfather had once said to him... if you want to change your destiny, you will need to rely on yourself!

The cheetah mecha operator was just about to take the assessment again to graduate and officially leave the status of newbie behind, when he noticed that the rabbit mecha's operator actually chose to return to training like he had previously.

The cheetah mecha operator was extremely curious. He had chosen to return out of curiosity about the rabbit mecha's assessment results, but why would the rabbit mecha choose to return as well? The cheetah mecha operator knew very well that it couldn't be because of him, for he hadn't even chosen the option to retake the

assessment yet.

Perhaps Ling Lan's superhuman control and adaptive ability had piqued the cheetah mecha operator's curiosity, for he did not choose to continue and take the assessment. Instead, he backed out from the assessment space, prepared to go look for that rabbit mecha, and ask him why exactly he had chosen to return.

After all, the rabbit mecha's result was extremely outstanding — a normal person would have been thrilled and chosen to graduate in a hurry so that they could go off and make a living in the real world of mecha.

Ling Lan, who had returned to the great hall of the mecha training hall, was reflecting deeply on how it had felt to control the mecha earlier during the assessment. Then, she sighed, saying, "Who knew that controlling mecha is not all about pushing the limits of speed... sometimes, alternating the speed between fast and slow to control the rhythm is better."

"Congratulations, Boss, on breaking past your bottleneck!" At this moment, Little Four finally piped up to congratulate Ling Lan. Earlier, Little Four had been smothering his mouth with both of his hands, afraid that in his excitement, he would accidentally make some noise to disrupt Ling Lan's breakthrough and realisation. If that had happened, he would have truly become a fiendish felon guilty of a thousand years of sin.

"This time is all thanks to you, Little Four. Thank you!" Ling Lan knew that this successful breakthrough had all been because Little Four had brought her to the outside virtual world and let her encounter mecha. And then, she had seen the images of the cheetah mecha during his assessment at the mecha training hall. This series of events had all led to her epiphany and subsequent breakthrough.

Ling Lan was just about to say something more when she saw countless red warning signs appear on her mecha's screen. Abruptly, she recalled that she had shut off the A.I.'s vocal functions during the assessment mission. She hurriedly turned it back on, and then the A.I. could be heard blaring out warnings in a frenzy: "Warning, mecha damage level at 67%. Please choose to repair immediately, please choose to repair immediately."

Ling Lan stuck out her tongue. Who could have guessed that the Rabbit Sky Leap skill would cause that much damage to the mecha? No wonder the learning space had emphasized again and again that the physical body must be extremely flexible to use this skill, otherwise the user could incur some latent injuries.

"Repair!" Right now, Ling Lan didn't want to choose a new mecha just yet — after all, she still hadn't passed the learning space's standards for the basic controls of this rabbit mecha.

Registering Ling Lan's order, the A.I. immediately displayed the contact numbers of the major mecha repair shops in the capital. All Ling Lan needed to do was call. As Ling Lan still hadn't graduated yet, she wasn't allowed to take the mecha out of the mecha training hall. So, she could only call for someone from one of the repair stores to come here and service her mecha. Ling Lan swiftly chose a repair shop closest to the mecha training hall, called its number, and secured an agreement for them to send someone to the mecha training hall to check her mecha in 5 minutes.

As Ling Lan was waiting, a cheetah mecha appeared again in the great hall of the mecha training hall. It looked left and right, and when it saw Ling Lan's rabbit mecha in the hall, it suddenly ran over. When it was about 10 metres away from Ling Lan, Ling Lan's mecha received the other's contact request.

Ling Lan was extremely surprised — why would this evolved spectre come looking for her? Out of responsibility for her own safety, Ling Lan seriously tried to recall if she had done anything that might have offended the other. Coming up with nothing, she approved the contact request and accepted the communications channel he established. Then, she asked hesitantly, "What's up?"

Against the mysterious ability of a spectre, Ling Lan was still very wary. She would try her best to avoid offending the other as much as possible.

"Excuse me, I just wanted to ask. Why didn't you choose to graduate earlier, coming back here instead?" The voice of the cheetah mecha operator was still the same voice; it was just as Little Four had said — the operator of the cheetah mecha was that evolved spectre.

"My mecha's broken." Ling Lan's reply obviously surprised the other. It was true that mecha would often get damaged with newbies piloting them, because some people with terrible control skills would ram the mecha into obstacles until they were almost

unrecognizable during basic training. Just like when Ling Lan slammed into walls repeatedly at the beginning of her training. However, Ling Lan was obviously an expert at control, so she wouldn't make this kind of low-level mistake — so how did the other's mecha get broken?

The doubts of the cheetah mecha operator merely flashed through his mind, unsaid, but Ling Lan's reply still did not explain his decision to return. "Even if you choose to graduate, you can still get the repair shop to come and repair your mecha, just at a different location."

"Oh, this is just one of the reasons. The main reason why I chose to return is because there are still many things wrong with my basic control. I still need a lot of practice to make sure there is no chance for error." The cheetah mecha operator also had a hand in Ling Lan's breakthrough — the other just didn't know it — so, the grateful Ling Lan decided to reveal a bit of her secrets of evolution to him. As for whether the other believed her, that was not something she was responsible for. She was just going to act in a way that would give her peace of mind.

Of course, Ling Lan also thought of building a good connection with the other. If the other really took her words to heart, and trained up his basic mecha control, it was very likely that he would be able to achieve the rank of special-class mecha operator at the least. In Ling Lan's opinion, the other's innate talent with mecha was even better than her own.

"Didn't your result already make it into the top 1000 of the elite leaderboard?" The cheetah mecha operator did not understand. "Doesn't this result prove that your basic training is already very outstanding?"

"Outstanding doesn't equal perfect. Besides, aren't there about 1000 other people in front of me? I don't want to lose to them," said Ling Lan calmly. These were words spoken from her heart — although she wasn't sure what realm her father had achieved with his ultimate immersion into perfecting his basic control, she couldn't lose to any other random people out there, right?

The cheetah mecha operator seemed to have been shaken by Ling Lan's words; only after a long while did he reply, "So that's why. But we can still practise our basic control outside; we don't necessarily have to stay here in the training hall."

"There are too many distractions outside. People are very easily attracted by fresh

new things. At that time, I'll definitely get distracted and won't be able to focus fully on training my basic control. So I might as well get rid of all these potential problems from the start. Here, there's nothing, so all I can do is train my basic control. I'm not a very strong-willed person, so I can only use this method to fix that. But Big Brother, you are different from me. Perhaps you can stand the loneliness and resist the temptations..." Ling Lan started teasing the other, making the other unsure whether to laugh or cry.

At this moment, 4 to 5 people accompanying a repair mecha walked into the training hall. Ling Lan knew that this was most likely the repairmen she had made an appointment with, so she bade farewell to the cheetah mecha operator, and walked over to greet the group.

The cheetah mecha operator sat within his cockpit, thinking. In the end, he found that what Ling Lan said was true — he also could not confirm that if given the choice to learn a new move, he would be able to resist the temptation, and choose to practise that instead of continuing to focus on his basic control.

"Ambitious. Actually planning to defeat all those other prodigies before him. How interesting..." The cheetah mecha operator rubbed the control stick in his hands, a slight smile on his lips. Talking to himself, he said, "Since I plan to spark a revolution, then I will need to achieve the pinnacle of strength in this world. Then, starting now, I can't lose to anyone. How can I be satisfied with just being within the top 1000..."

Chapter 125

The Emergence of Gods?

In one of the basic training rooms in the mecha training hall of planet Azure, three mecha were practising to dodge obstacles in the air and on the ground.

A humanoid mecha and an avian mecha very quickly finished their own basic training, leaving only a rhinoceros bestial mecha dodging awkwardly — he was only about halfway through his course.

The other two mecha who had already finished began to talk quietly between themselves. In an annoyed tone, the avian mecha said, "Lu Xiaolong is really too stupid. Even letting him choose to control the easiest bestial mecha, he still needs over 15 minutes to complete the basic training course. The assessment contents will be several times harder than this, and a passing grade needs to be within 5 minutes... heaven knows when he'll be able to get there and graduate."

"Originally, I had thought he was simple-minded and easy to order around, but now it looks like I made a mistake. Simpletons just can't handle mecha control," said the humanoid mecha sulkily, as if deeply regretting his oversight.

"Do we have to stay here together with this idiot? The other students who graduated from the scout academy with us have all already entered the real mecha world. I even heard that quite a few of them have already upgraded their mecha." The avian mecha was rather anxious, feeling that he was being held back by that idiot on their team.

"At the beginning when we wanted to form our 3-man team, our plan was for Lu Xiaolong to be the shield right at the front. You would be in charge of aerial attacks, and I would cover long-range attacks. If we give up on him, we'll need to find a new team member in the mecha world..." The humanoid mecha was considering what would be the most beneficial course of action for them.

"By the time we wait for that idiot to graduate, we would long have integrated with our new team member. Right now, I'm very worried about whether he can even coordinate with us. You should know that the middle to late stages require team work to complete missions. At that time, a team cannot have any notable weaknesses..." The

avian mecha had already lost patience; he didn't think much of Lu Xiaolong's chances at all, thinking that he might hold them back then.

"Fine, we won't wait for him anymore. Let's go take the assessment first, but how should we tell him?" The humanoid mecha had always maintained his outward image of a nice guy.

"Watch me do it. When the idiot comes out from practice, I'll tell him." The avian mecha knew the troubles of the humanoid mecha, so he chose to volunteer.

After waiting a good long while, the bestial mecha finally finished his one round of basic training. Face beaded with sweat, he ran over to the two mecha waiting for him, and said in embarrassment, "Sorry, Ah Ka, Dali, I made you wait."

The avian mecha sighed softly and said, "Xiaolong, looks like we need to go our separate ways."

The bestial mecha was taken aback, unable to figure out what the avian mecha was saying at that moment.

"I discussed things with Ah Ka, and think that we should go and take the basic assessment first. We'll then go out to the mecha world to gather some resources, and then complete a team building mission to fully establish a team." The avian mecha laid out their plans.

The bestial mecha still didn't understand. "Isn't the minimum requirement for the team building mission three people?"

"We've checked out the discussion forums at the mecha world, there are professional gamers who specialize in taking on these kinds of missions. They help teams that don't have enough members to complete the mission, and when a proper member comes along, they'll quit the team to let the other in." The avian mecha was cursing internally — why did other have to choose to be so smart now? Actually knowing about the member requirement for the team building mission.

"So that's how it is. That's great! I've been worried that I might be holding you both back. This past period of time, I've actually been thinking of telling you both to just go look for a new member and stop waiting for me." The bestial mecha let out a sigh of relief. He was really very reluctant to part ways with these two good friends who were willing to accommodate his denseness.

"Hehe, so you had already known that you were holding us back, eh..." The avian mecha chuckled awkwardly. Internally, he was filled with regret. He regretted that he hadn't known the other had had these kinds of thoughts; otherwise, he wouldn't have had to find this sort of excuse. He was also annoyed at the other — if he had those kinds of thoughts, then why hadn't he said anything earlier?! If he really considered them as friends, then he definitely wouldn't have wanted to hold them back. This Lu Xiaolong was clearly trying to cling to them and rely on them.

"Xiaolong, don't take this to heart too much. We're good friends, you know. You need to work hard here; don't let us leave you too far behind," said the humanoid mecha in a hurry, sensing the avian mecha's building rage. If the fact that they had abandoned a teammate were to become public knowledge, their team would definitely be unable to get a new member. Whether it was in the real world or on the virtual network, abandoning and betraying one's teammate was extremely looked down upon. He was unwilling to have such a sin staining his name.

Clearly ashamed, the bestial mecha said, "Yeah, I'll work hard. I must pass this assessment as soon as possible to catch up to you two."

The avian mecha operator's lips curled, thinking nothing of the other's promises. However, under the humanoid mecha's warning glare, he could only throw out some comforting words, "You really don't have to rush. Wait for us to get even more resources in the mecha world, then when you join us, you will be able to get a newer and better mecha immediately."

The bestial mecha said gratefully, "Thank you, Ah Ka and Dali."

The humanoid mecha and the avian mecha immediately made preparations to take the assessment. The bestial mecha wanted to watch their assessments, hoping to gain some experience, but the humanoid mecha advised him otherwise, saying, "You should observe the assessment of someone who's also using a bestial mecha. That would be much more useful for you."

The bestial mecha felt that what the humanoid mecha said was right. So, he looked up the assessment venues of bestial mecha, and found that there were a few bestial mecha taking the assessment right now. He selected the one with the most recent start time, and clicked the option to enter and observe.

Seeing the bestial mecha disappear from the training room, the humanoid mecha and

the avian mecha each chose to begin their respective assessments, and were transported to their individual assessment mission spaces.

Lu Xiaolong had just entered the assessment space, when he saw a rabbit mecha dancing and leaping gracefully among the irregularly moving obstacles. Lu Xiaolong first reaction was to wonder if he was seeing things — he rubbed his eyes and found that the scene before him was real. Gradually, without knowing it, he was absorbed into the other's movements. The mecha before his eyes was no longer a mecha, but a real live rabbit, prancing freely in a forest.

Suddenly, the scene stopped moving. Lu Xiaolong roused from his trance, and found that the rabbit mecha had already passed and ended its assessment. Abruptly thinking of something, he looked up at the top part of his screen. A line of red text was flashing brightly, *"Congratulations, XXX, for graduating the basic mecha controls course with a result of 1 minute 18 seconds. This record has been entered into the top 100 of the elite leaderboard."*

"Top 100 of the elite leaderboard!" Lu Xiaolong felt as if his eyes were about to pop out of his head. Such great fortune had fallen upon him — he had never expected that a random choice had given him the chance to observe the assessment of someone at the level of a god. If he could only draw some inspiration from this experience, it would benefit him for life.

However, Lu Xiaolong very quickly deflated, because he found that in his mind, other than the other's magnificent and graceful moves, there was nothing else. This had truly been an epic fail of an observation — he couldn't believe he had missed such a great opportunity.

Head bowed in depression, Lu Xiaolong opened up the selection pane for bestial mecha assessments once more. Besides the rabbit mecha which had just finished, the other mecha's assessments were still in progress. Lu Xiaolong stared at the few names on his list, and just couldn't work up the enthusiasm to go watch any of them.

Right at that moment, a new mecha suddenly popped out among the selections. Reflexively, Lu Xiaolong clicked on it.

This time, it was a cheetah mecha. Lu Xiaolong had just raised his head, when he saw

the cheetah mecha flying out to become a shooting ray of light, even leaving a phantom trail behind it.

"An expert!" Although Lu Xiaolong knew his own control was nothing to talk about, his skills of appreciation were pretty amazing. He immediately sensed that he had gotten lucky once again.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the other arrived at the section with the moving obstacles. The feeling that he got from the rabbit mecha in the previous assessment engulfed him once more. Once again, he had the illusion that the cheetah mecha before his eyes was a live cheetah on the hunt. It nimbly dodged all obstacles in its way, heading unerringly towards its target.

Lu Xiaolong didn't even look at the time; once again, he was utterly absorbed in the cheetah mecha's agile movements, all the way till the end.

"Congratulations, XXX, for graduating the basic mecha controls course with a result of 1 minute 19 seconds. This record has been entered into the top 100 of the elite leaderboard." Unsurprisingly, when Lu Xiaolong turned back to his screen, a result infinitely close to the rabbit mecha's appeared before his eyes. It was also a top 100 score.

"Later, I must definitely participate in the mecha lucky draw!" Lu Xiaolong felt that his RP must definitely be off the charts for him to bump into two gods of mecha back to back. This luck could very well nab him a rumoured mecha equipment in the draw!

If only he could get to know those two gods... but unfortunately, those gods must have already chosen to graduate and leave. Feeling regretful, Lu Xiaolong didn't have any mood to observe any further, so he chose to leave the assessment area to return once more to his training room. But when he got there, the two gods that he had assumed had graduated and left were actually standing right there before him...

"Ah... why are you two still here?!" Lu Xiaolong's voice blasted out into the room. It turned out that Lu Xiaolong had forgotten to close the public speaker he had turned on when he had spoken with his friends.

The rabbit mecha and the cheetah mecha had initially been practising on their own, but hearing his voice, they both looked back simultaneously.

Lu Xiaolong could almost see the confusion in the eyes of both mecha. This made him

almost want to slap himself so that he could use pain to remind himself to be more aware of what he was doing.

"Didn't you both make it into the top 100 already? Why didn't you choose to graduate?" Lu Xiaolong still couldn't restrain his curiosity, spilling his questions out in a rush.

However, right after he said this, Lu Xiaolong immediately regretted it. Who knew if the two gods would find his questions annoying and choose to leave this room and go somewhere else? Then, wouldn't he have thoroughly lost the chance to get to know these two gods better?

Sure enough, the rabbit mecha only turned to glance at the cheetah mecha, and then with a bob of its head, it turned away to continue practising its basic movements. Sigh, as expected, gods weren't so easy to approach. Lu Xiaolong lowered his head and sighed dejectedly.

Chapter 126

A Strange Sense of Rapport!

Just as Lu Xiaolong was beating himself up mentally, a cool voice suddenly rang out by his ear, "The basics are very important. We haven't mastered them fully yet, which is why we cannot graduate and leave."

Lu Xiaolong jerked his head up and saw that it was the cheetah mecha who had replied. Gratefulness surged in his heart — so not all gods were cold and aloof; this cheetah mecha operator was obviously a friendly person.

In reality, Lu Xiaolong was completely wrong. The cheetah mecha hadn't planned to answer Lu Xiaolong's question to begin with, but because the rabbit mecha had signalled him to do so with that glance and bob of its head, the cheetah mecha had no choice but to reply.

After several consecutive months of hanging out together, even though they hardly spoke to one another, a strange sense of rapport had been born between them. With just a look or a small motion, they could just tell what the other meant. Thus, the rabbit mecha's previous glance and head bob had let the cheetah mecha operator understand completely what the other was asking.

"But... you are both already so strong. How could it be that you've still not mastered basic control?" Lu Xiaolong just couldn't understand. If these results wasn't proof that they had mastered the basics, then did it mean that those of them who had graduated by just achieving the passing line were basically unfit to operate mecha?

"Are we strong? Aren't there about 100 other stronger people in front of us?" The cheetah mecha operator's voice had a trace of self-mocking, as if unsatisfied with their current results.

This statement by the cheetah mecha operator made the rabbit mecha turn to glance at him once more. Its gaze was clearly questioning — when had they become a group?

This made the cheetah mecha operator snicker a little internally. It really was rather unbelievable — the two of them had only had one actual conversation. Their

subsequent meetings had been coincidental when they happened to meet up in the training room. They really weren't that close, but there was just this indescribable rapport between the two of them.

Of course, part of this serendipity was due to his own initiative. Ever since their only conversation, he had always used his spiritual strength to locate the other's position, and then pretended to have entered the same room to train by coincidence.

However, he truly was fated to meet up with the other. Many times, the rabbit mecha arrived after him, but still somehow found its way into the training room he was in. (At this moment, Little Four was laughing gleefully up at the heavens: What? You think the magistrates are the only ones allowed to burn down houses, while the common people are forbidden even to light lamps?¹ Who can beat me, Little Four, in this virtual realm?)

Perhaps the heavens were being kind to him, the gods and spirits giving a peerless prodigy like him their blessing in the form of this assistance from an unexpected quarter.

He hadn't dismissed Ling Lan's words, which was why he changed his original plan to graduate and leave, choosing to remain here in the mecha training hall to hone his basic mecha control instead. On top of that, he also put in more effort into training up the scout academy basics physical skills. He figured that since it was also a foundational skill set, basic physical skills should be similarly important.

Reality proved that his assumptions were not wrong. In the end, he could thoroughly sense the benefits honing his foundations had brought to him. In the real world, his initially weak and sickly body was slowly recovering, while in the virtual world, his mecha control had broken through several limits, causing his results to improve in leaps and bounds.

As intelligent as he was, he had long figured out that the rabbit mecha had intentionally revealed those things to him in their only conversation. Perhaps the both of them being mecha prodigies in their own right had sparked some mutual care, so the other had been willing to reveal some of his own secrets of mecha control to him. This secret was very likely an exclusive secret belonging to the other's sect. Otherwise, out of the many mecha operators out there, why were there so few who viewed basic control with such importance? Thus, he would carve this great kindness into his heart.

Of course, he had no way to repay this kindness just yet — in fact, he didn't even dare to reveal his true identity to the other right now. Before he was fully in control of his own destiny, he needed to keep a low profile, otherwise it would be spitting on all that his grandfather had done for him.

He knew very well that, due to that reading of his Four Pillars of Destiny ², his grandfather had hidden all information on his true potential, purposefully announcing his mediocrity instead. In the end, his grandfather had even used the excuse of his potential being too average to exile him to the distant planet Azure. All of this was to protect him, to keep him out of the crosshairs of the rich and powerful elite.

But he was still indignant about it. He wasn't willing to just choose to escape passively — he wanted to become strong, and then stand at the pinnacle of this world, able to laugh at all the buffeting storms and winds. Yes, he wanted to master his own destiny — he wanted to change that prophesized destined finale!

The cheetah mecha was involuntarily drawn into his own thoughts. Meanwhile, due to the other's words, Lu Xiaolong had lost all of his initial urgency to leave the training hall. He believed that if the god had said so and was doing so, then it must really mean that the basics were very important. Without even having to think about it, he hurriedly sent a message to his two good friends taking the assessment. He told them not to graduate just yet, but to come back and train up their basic control more.

After a few minutes, his good friends responded. His good intentions naturally weren't able to convince these two 'good friends' who had already decided to abandon him. Their messages even suggested in a roundabout way that he was only doing this because he couldn't bear to see them leave, and was resorting to this sort of desperate measures.

Lu Xiaolong may be a bit slow when it came to learning, but he wasn't an idiot; of course he understood the hidden meaning in their messages. Lu Xiaolong was extremely hurt. He really wished he could explain to his good friends, even hoping that they would be able to watch the assessments of the two gods... but he found that the two of them had shut off their communicators simultaneously, automatically rejecting all of his contact requests.

He went through his contact list, trying to pass on a message through some of their mutual friends, but the response he received again and again was not to disturb them — now that they were in the real mecha world, they weren't as free as when they were

in the mecha training hall; they were really very very busy...

By this time, Lu Xiaolong had already sensed something was off, but he did not want to think too much about it, unwilling to doubt his good friends. Before him were two options — one was to stop worrying about the others and focus on his own basic training until he was satisfied; the other was to quickly pass the assessment, paying no mind to how badly he did, so that he could be reunited with his friends as soon as possible.

He glanced at the two gods resting at the side after their practice, and after some thought, decided that he should try asking the cheetah mecha about this. Perhaps the god would be able to give him a good idea.

The cheetah mecha operator saw the rhinoceros mecha approaching him once again, and couldn't help but frown. Honestly, he didn't really like interacting with strangers — this was primarily due to his cloistered life thus far in his manor.

Subconsciously, he looked towards the rabbit mecha. The rabbit mecha's eyes suddenly blinked at him, as if telling him to be nice.

The cheetah mecha operator smiled wryly. Alright, since the rabbit mecha operator wanted him to be nice, then he would be nice. He just wasn't able to refuse someone who had helped him.

"Little Four, isn't challenging the other's tolerance this way a bit overboard?" Ling Lan was now rather worried that if the operator of the rhinoceros mecha really infuriated the cheetah mecha, he might be murdered right off by the other.

"Don't worry. I've already made arrangements. The rhinoceros won't die," replied Little Four. *"If I hadn't worked things out yet, I wouldn't have let him get so close to you. After all, he's an evolved spectre!"* Otherwise, if by any chance he was out and about away from his boss, and his boss bumped into the other, wouldn't that be too dangerous?

"That said, from the looks of it, his temperament is not bad. Not at all as dangerous as we thought." Little Four was very satisfied with the other's behaviour thus far. This way, he can leave Boss to him without any worry.

Little Four suddenly felt that something wasn't right — what did he just think about

leaving Boss to him... Oh fie fie fie, he must take that back! Anyone who dares to covet his boss must die! Death to all of them! Little Four began sharpening his knife, his little eyes glaring with suspicion and animosity at the cheetah mecha operator.

Of course, this behaviour of Little Four's was immediately stopped by Ling Lan. Ling Lan was extremely speechless — what nonsense was this brat thinking of this time? Ling Lan suddenly found that having a shared mind may not always be a good thing.

Lu Xiaolong told everything to the cheetah mecha operator in order, and Ling Lan and the cheetah mecha operator immediately knew what was up. Both of them were good at reading people, so they knew without a doubt that the poor Lu Xiaolong had been heartlessly cast aside by the two people he considered his good friends.

Ling Lan cast a sympathetic glance at Lu Xiaolong, but believed that this was actually a good thing. At least now he wouldn't be used up by his friends before being cast aside. In that sense, this was much better.

The cheetah mecha operator also thought the same — the two of them once again shared a look through their mecha, feeling as if they could clearly sense the other's thoughts. Once again, they marvelled at the miraculous rapport between the both of them; there were just no words to describe it.

Of course, the two of them weren't about to blurt out the answer directly. They were just passing acquaintances with Lu Xiaolong; they weren't close enough to be that blunt.

The cheetah mecha operator thought for a moment before saying, "I recommend you focus on training up your basic control. Although the time taken will be longer, this way will obviously be more useful to your friends. I'm sure you don't want to become a burden to them, right?" Perhaps time will let the other figure things out for himself.

Lu Xiaolong nodded energetically. What the god was saying was undoubtedly what worried him the most.

"If you don't have enough talent, then you'll just have to make up for it with hard work. So, don't think about simply passing. Make sure you master your basic control, otherwise you'll really become a burden to your good friends." Of course, the good friends he was talking about referred to true friends, and not those who had

abandoned Lu Xiaolong.

The cheetah mecha operator's words enlightened Lu Xiaolong. That's true, even if he forced a pass and went over now, he still wouldn't be much help to his friends. He might as well stay here and put in more practice to improve his basic control, and only move on when he truly had the ability to help them.

Decided, Lu Xiaolong bid farewell to the two gods. Of course, before he left, he tried to ask for a way to contact the two of them, but was unfortunately turned down by the cheetah mecha operator. Lu Xiaolong did not dare to cling — he knew that it was already a great blessing to have received some guidance from a god just once. If he were greedy and tried to ask for more, that would be too shameless. However, he still told them his name, his parting words and tone filled with the hope that they might meet up again someday. Hopefully at that time, the gods would still remember him.

Seeing the other leave reluctantly, Ling Lan couldn't hold back a sigh. "Who knew you were so good with words?"

"Is that so? Looks like I have talent in this area." Hearing the other's praise, the cheetah mecha operator's mood improved immensely, and he began joking back.

"Yes! You should really develop your skills in this area. You shouldn't waste your talent." Ling Lan could hear the other's humour, and so she replied in kind with a laugh. Ling Lan had no way to know that because of this one statement, the other would truly change how he interacted with others. When the two of them met up again in the future, she wouldn't imagine the person she met then would be the same person as this cheetah mecha operator she knew now.

Chapter 127

Preset Control Mode!

"Hmm, since you've said so, I'll have to work on it then." The cheetah mecha operator's reply was very serious, but Ling Lan did not notice, still thinking that the other was joking.

There was a slight pause, and then the cheetah mecha operator said in awe, "Your speed this time is faster than mine. Recently, I've gotten stuck in a bottleneck. I keep getting stalled at this time with no way to progress further. My hand speed has already hit a limit, maybe this is the most I can do." The cheetah mecha operator's voice was somewhat sad; perhaps the time to leave had come.

"Then just train your hand speed!" Ling Lan blurted. After several months of hanging out together with their mutual understanding, Ling Lan was also extremely reluctant to see the other leave. However, her words had barely faded when her guard went up. When did she lose all her defences against the other?

"Train my hand speed? How do I do that?" exclaimed the cheetah mecha operator in response, just as shocked by Ling Lan's words.

However, he very quickly realised what he had done — his question had most likely stepped into the territory of the other's inherited secrets. How could he covet the other's training secrets? "I'm sorry. I overstepped."

"It's fine..." Ling Lan frowned silently. She actually felt somewhat bad, as if not telling him was a sin. What in the world was happening? If Ling Lan's mind weren't so steady, she might have already blurted out the training method without even knowing it.

"Little Four, can you sense anything off?" In her mind, Ling Lan quickly called Little Four to the rescue.

"Nope... everything's perfectly normal! Eh? What's this? What a strange mental fluctuation..." exclaimed Little Four in shock. *"Actually matching up with the frequency of Boss's real brainwaves... hold on, let me check my databases to see what this means."*

"Is it harmful?" Ling Lan asked anxiously. She could not afford to take any chances — the other was a very dangerous evolved spectre, you know.

Little Four had already pulled up the data by this point, and with some schadenfreude he said, *"Oh, it's nothing much. It will just magnify a certain positive substance¹ infinitely. For example, if you think he's not bad, then under the influence of this fluctuation, you will think he's really nice. If you think well of him, then this feeling will directly extend to the point of considering him a close friend. If you have any bit of affection for him... hehe, Boss, then you're done for. You'll immediately be at the step of loving him so much that you'd be willing to die for him."*

Little Four's words made Ling Lan roll her eyes at him. Was she someone that thirsty, that desperate? Was she really surging with so much lustful desire?

"Also, this ability can reduce the existence of a certain negative substance. For example, it can decrease an enemy's animosity, correct other's negative opinions of him etcetera... in short, everyone who sees him will like him!"

"He's doing it on purpose?" Ling Lan's face was tiger-fierce. If the other had used this ability on purpose, she would definitely put him on her blacklist. Although she had a good impression of him, who knew if this was all just the product of this ability?

"No, this is an ability he was born with. He doesn't know how to use it consciously." Little Four rubbed his chin and cackled, *"Hehehe... because he likes you so much, and hopes you will like him in return, that's why this ability activated now. Let me put it this way. This ability can only appear when he himself truly wants to treat the other well. So, congratulations Boss, you are part of the group of people whom he really likes and wants to treat well."*

At this, Ling Lan relaxed. Little Four could even see the minor curve of a small smile on her lips — it looks like his boss was greatly gladdened by this. Little Four felt nostalgic — ever since Boss had begun developing in the direction of becoming a slackface, he had rarely ever seen Boss smile anymore. He really missed it so much. Boss's smile at the start had been so beautiful — though it might not have been able to topple countries, it was certainly more than lovely enough to topple cities.

As he continued to think about it, Little Four began to resent those instructors in the learning space. Why was it set up so that all the smiling teachers were those with black innards and perverse attitudes?! While the strict and proper ones just had to have ice-

blocks for faces? Totally skewing the perspective of his boss... it should be known that Boss truly loathed that forever outwardly smiling, but internally extremely perverse Instructor Number Five.

Little Four's words naturally made Ling Lan very happy — it had already been several months since she had told the cheetah mecha operator about the importance of the basics. After spending so much time together, she would have cultivated some emotions even if the other was a rock, not to mention that they were both living breathing human beings. Unknowingly, the cheetah mecha operator wasn't the only one who had come to consider Ling Lan as a friend; Ling Lan herself had come to see the other as a dependable friend.

Setting that aside, during this time, Ling Lan had also overcome many difficulties within the learning space's mission.

Because Ling Lan had broken through her bottleneck, there was a resulting breakthrough in her hand speed once again. This made Ling Lan's passing time improve tremendously, clocking in at slightly less than 3 minutes 10 seconds. This was just less than 10 seconds away from the mission's passing condition of 3 minutes.

Subsequently, Ling Lan attempted the tunnel mission again and again, each time fixing the control errors she made in her previous run. As Ling Lan's mistakes dwindled, her time needed for the course also got closer and closer to 3 minutes. However, when she hit the 3 minute 3 second mark, Ling Lan once again hit a wall. After several consecutive practices, she found that she couldn't progress any bit further.

Ling Lan did not panic. Even though her time was so close to the designated time limit of the mission, she knew very well that rushing would not solve anything. Only keeping calm would help her find a way to overcome this in the end.

Ling Lan started to think back on the movements of the cheetah mecha — back then, the cheetah mecha's movements had been extremely fluid, and his speed had been very fast as well; however, his running and jumping rhythm had not been as intense as his speed would suggest. Instead of more frequent bounds, it was more like each bounding motion had used up the mecha's limits — in other words, he had pulled out every bit of the mecha's latent reserves.

Even more astounding was the fact that he had used the reaction force of every landing to maintain and add on to his velocity, pushing it to the extreme. This had allowed the

cheetah mecha's speed to go beyond the limits the operator had given it, letting it access speed beyond the abilities of the operator.

Meanwhile, she herself had similarly managed to push her rabbit mecha's speed to the limit, but could she also use the reaction force from this type of repetitive landing to increase her speed?

Ling Lan knew the Rabbit Sky Leap was the best stepping reaction force technique — she just wasn't sure how long the rabbit mecha in the learning space could hold out under the technique.

Ling Lan experimented a few times and finally grasped the timing. She could only use it during the second half of the course, and it had to be after the two-thirds point — otherwise, if she used it too early, the mecha would disintegrate before she could pass the mission.

Still, the advantage of the learning space was once again displayed. That is, mecha were indestructible inside it — after disintegrating, when she once again went back to the start, the mecha's condition would be back at 100%.

It wasn't free however. Ling Lan was naturally pained when she found that her honour points had been ruthlessly deducted by a whole 10 points — this was equal to the amount which she had used to redeem the Rabbit Sky Leap skill!

Under this repetitive testing, Ling Lan had used up almost 80 honour points before she finally pinned down the timing needed to use the Rabbit Sky Leap in the mission. Even if the mecha did not disintegrate, smaller repairs still required honour points; it was just slightly cheaper.

And then, in the final moments left, by luck, Ling Lan finally managed to break through the 3-minute limit, clocking in at 2 minutes 59 seconds. The cost was rather steep — this time, due to overwhelming speed, the rabbit mecha had almost disintegrated entirely. Luckily, she had managed to complete the mission before it could fully disintegrate.

However, the learning space did not give Ling Lan any time to take pride in her achievement. At this moment, Instructor Number Three pranced onto the scene. He seated Ling Lan in the auxiliary seat, and then operated the rabbit mecha himself to run through the mission course once.

Ling Lan could see very well that Instructor Number Three's hand speed wasn't that fast; she could see every movement of his hands clearly. However, it was precisely this kind of control method that made the rabbit mecha move through the tunnel as if it were dancing. At times, it even left trails of light behind it, flashing through the tunnel like a bolt of lightning.

As Instructor Number Three controlled the mecha, he explained the reasoning for this type of control method to Ling Lan. Ling Lan compared it against her own control method and recognised her deficiencies. Right then, she finally understood why the instructor hadn't taught her how to control the mecha at the beginning, instead leaving her to figure things out for herself. It was because some elements of mecha control needed to be personally experienced before one could understand why it had to be done a certain way — only by doing so could one understand what was wrong. Most importantly, everyone had their own control habits, and the best control method was the one which suited oneself.

The whole way through, Ling Lan gained new insight on controls, while Instructor Number Three breezed through the course, finishing it in 2 minutes and 11 seconds on the dot.

Regarding this, Ling Lan was very curious. How did Instructor Number Three manage to achieve such a terrifying completion speed when his hand speed had been slower than hers? Of course, when Ling Lan asked this question, Instructor Number Three just asked her in return: Was his hand speed really slower than hers?

Ling Lan looked in astonishment at the reading from the hand speed monitor that the mecha's A.I. had gathered, finding that Instructor Number Three's hand speed had actually been the same as hers. But why did it look like his hand speed was slower then? She had not even noticed the appearance of any afterimages — Ling Lan knew that when her hand speed reached a certain level, this phenomenon would appear.

"You focused all your speed on a particular time period. Not only does this tire out your hands and mind, but even the mecha itself would also be extremely worn out," said Instructor Number Three, patting the body of the rabbit mecha, gaze affectionate. It was as if the mecha before his eyes was not a mecha, but a living thing which needed to be protected and cared for, and not controlled barbarically.

Ling Lan was surprised by the instructor's actions, but at this moment, she still could not comprehend this mental state of a mecha operator. She could only think back on

the speed the instructor had used when controlling the mecha, and found that he had maintained an even speed throughout the course — this was rather strange. Mind you, within the tunnel, every scene was different, and there were even some unpredictable scenarios — how in the world had Instructor Number Three managed that?

"Among the control commands of the mecha, there is something called preset control mode. You should use it appropriately." Instructor Number Three's words enlightened Ling Lan. She knew very well what preset control mode was — the resting motion of her mecha was a type of preset control. It's just that that motion was a fixed preset control; she just had to program the motion into the mecha beforehand, and then use the specially trained buttons to execute it...

Chapter 128

Rabbit-Cheetah Duo!

Ling Lan did not have to question Number Three any further on how to input these preset control commands. This was because Ling Lan already knew that, other than the fixed preset control mode, there was also an instantaneous preset control mode. The latter mode would accept extremely brief input, and would only be effective for one usage.

This was a type of control method which was extremely well-suited for emergency battle. However, many people had forgotten that mecha came with this function, because this instantaneous preset control mode required a lot from the operator. Many people did not possess the ability to handle this type of control method, so most mecha operators still found it easier to just depend on their own adaptive ability and control the mecha directly.

Instantaneous preset control mode needed the mecha operator using it to have a certain level of predictive ability — the so-called awakened 'sixth sense' of this world. Meanwhile, in the learning space, this ability was named 'Animal Instinct', and was a lower-average standard innate perception ability.

In fact, Ling Lan's innate talent of Profound Insight was the best among the other innate talents in the same category. As such, the instantaneous preset control mode was extremely appropriate for Ling Lan — this was why Instructor Number Three had made it a point to bring it up.

During this time, Little Four had gradually siphoned in data he had collected from the real world into the learning space, giving the instructors within it a general understanding of the technological environment Ling Lan was living in. Thus, they knew that this world was extremely behind with regards to awakened perception abilities at the moment, and even in terms of mecha control, this world was N-levels worse than that of their own world.

So, the instantaneous preset control mode, which was familiar to all the residents of the learning space, was rather neglected in this world. Here, with the exception of those who had awakened the sixth sense, other common mecha operators would be

utterly clueless about this function on their mecha, and even many instructors of mecha control may not remember the existence of this function. This was another reason why Instructor Number Three had stepped up to demonstrate mecha control in person.

Ling Lan understood what Instructor Number Three intended with his guidance. In contrast with the instructor's control, she could clearly see that she was still lacking in many areas, whether it be awareness, control, or prediction. Ling Lan knew this was all because her basics were still below standard, so she didn't choose to learn a new control method, merely continuing to train her basic control. The only exception was that she began including the usage of instantaneous preset control mode in her training. Of course, this was extremely difficult. Many times, Ling Lan's attempts ended in failure, but Ling Lan still continued tirelessly in her attempts to learn it.

In this manner, several months passed. Ling Lan's life fell into a regulated routine — at dawn and at dusk, she set aside two blocks of time to train her basic physical skills; whether it was the scout academy's or the one taught by the learning space, she wouldn't allow them to fall behind. At the same time, she also didn't forget to train her hand speed. By this time, she had already broken through the limit of three marbles¹, and was now able to train with four marbles at a time.

However, just like when she had been training with three marbles, she could not sustain the activity for long. Still, Ling Lan wasn't anxious — she remained patient and practised every day, improving bit by bit. It was a victory as long as she could sustain activity for just a little bit longer than the day before.

Meanwhile, during the day, she would attend classes at the academy if there were classes, and if there weren't, she would enter the virtual world to practise her mecha control there. Of course, Ling Lan would habitually check to see if that cheetah mecha was at the mecha training hall. Anyone would have a lasting impression of the first stranger they met in the virtual world who also helped them out.

Of course, there was another reason Ling Lan was looking for the other — every time she saw the other's training movements, she would somehow gain some measure of insight from it. In return, the other seemed to be of a similar mindset; and so, the two of them often ended up training together without planning it in advance. Although they still did not speak much to one another, they knew each other very well, just like old bosom friends. By the end, they could even tell with just a look or a motion what the other wanted to do.

Meanwhile, Little Four was also very busy. One of his duties was to find time to fake Ling Lan's virtual appearance to help his boss complete some of those scout academy daily missions. Ling Lan couldn't very well stay offline for so long, right? Besides that, Little Four also had to help Boss to maintain her relationships with Qi Long and the others. There were times when he even had to pretend to be Ling Lan to join them in clearing some group missions. Luckily, Little Four had grown up with Ling Lan and had hung around her all this time, so he was extremely familiar with Ling Lan's mannerisms and tone of voice, managing to carry it off without raising any suspicion among her companions.

On top of that, Little Four still had to prevent the cheetah mecha operator from getting too close — Little Four firmly believed that someone being so nice for no reason, must definitely be hiding some evil intention. The cheetah mecha operator was treating his boss so well, so he must have some nefarious intentions. Little Four had to protect his boss!

Of course, all this was just Little Four's opinion; Ling Lan completely disagreed. From what she could sense, the cheetah mecha operator was extremely mature, and he was also an operator who was deeply obsessed with mecha control. Moreover, the other did not even know whether she was a boy or a girl, so what sort of nefarious intentions could he have?

Of course, Ling Lan's words drew Little Four's derision. He mocked her, saying that she was just fooling herself — just think about it, all of the newbies in the mecha training hall were basically all youths of about 16 years of age... why would a mature adult be here? And youths were the hardest people to figure out — who knew what kind of insanity they would involve themselves in next?

Neither one could convince the other, but Ling Lan did not take any of this to heart. She continued to 'coincidentally' meet the cheetah mecha (Little Four was the main contributor to this; he felt that it was still safest to keep someone dangerous close where he could watch him) and train together in silence. At times, Ling Lan would feel as if she had gained some breakthrough and enter the mecha training hall to take the basic assessment again. At those times, there would always be a cheetah mecha watching from the side. Similarly, every time the cheetah mecha retook the assessment, as long as Ling Lan was online then, she would also choose to watch from the side.

With all of this, Ling Lan felt that the cheetah mecha should be considered one of her

friends now. Which was why she had been so happy when she had heard what Little Four had to say about the other's ability. In her mind, only when both parties felt the same could a relationship be called a true friendship.

Thus, Ling Lan decided to tell the other her secret of training hand speed. "It actually isn't much of a secret. Back in the real world, you just need to place some marbles in your palm and move them around quickly without letting them fall, that's all."

Ling Lan's words caused the cheetah mecha to be extremely taken aback — he had never expected Ling Lan to just reveal her inherited secret just like that. He could not help but be worried for her, saying, "Aren't you afraid of drawing the displeasure of your teacher's sect? Don't reveal this kind of secret so easily in future."

"Displeasure? It shouldn't." Ling Lan lifted her head as she thought about it. She did not think her dad would be so stingy and mind that much, so she said, "Don't worry about it. I'm only telling you about this, because you're my friend."

Ling Lan's words touched the cheetah mecha operator. He suddenly had the urge to tell the other about his true identity, but the words had barely touched his lips when his grandfather's words echoed by his ear: "Little Lan², you must remember, while you're studying at the scout academy of planet Azure, even if you meet a friend you find extremely dependable, you still cannot let them know your real identity or what you really look like. Only when you're fully 20 years old, after you've officially become an adult..."

The cheetah mecha operator clenched his fists tightly and gritted his teeth — only by doing so could he push down the shame and guilt he felt to the bottom of his heart. After a long beat of silence, he finally managed to eke out two words, "Thank you!"

Ling Lan knew nothing about the struggle within the cheetah mecha operator's heart right now. She was in a great mood, because she believed that with the help of the training method to increase hand speed, the cheetah mecha would definitely continue to stay here and train his basic control. With a friend by her side, training wasn't as boring as it could be.

In the following period of time, inside the mecha training hall, a rabbit mecha and a cheetah mecha were often seen training their basic control together, taking

assessments together, studying control techniques together... they became known as the famous rabbit-cheetah duo of the mecha training hall.

The rabbit-cheetah duo's skilful and almost flawlessly perfect movements attracted the respect and admiration of all the mecha newbies who walked through the mecha training hall's doors. Gradually, they gained reputation among the newbies; every one of their assessments would draw countless spectators. These spectators were witness to the birth of Ling Lan's and the other's increasingly high ranking on the leaderboard. They saw off batch after batch of old newbies, and welcomed group after group of fresh newbies.

Due to these newbies both young and old, talk of the rabbit-cheetah duo spread even further and became even more legendary. In the end, rumours about them spread far and wide throughout the entire virtual world — saying that two experts of mecha control were unwilling to graduate from the planet Azure mecha training hall, because they wanted to surpass the old time and make a new record.

Of course, this rumour was greeted with scorn by most people. Almost everyone thought that the rabbit-cheetah duo were obviously chasing a pipe dream — they would never be able to break the old record. This was because the current best record of the basic control assessment was set ten years ago, by none other than the god-class operator Ling Xiao. Of course, back then, Ling Xiao still hadn't become a god-class operator yet.

Still, even so, his result wasn't something an average person could break. After repeated studies by specialists, they confirmed that Ling Xiao's result had already achieved the pinnacle of basic mecha control. Only if someone were to use mecha of special-class and above, combined with the control skills of an ace operator or better, then there might be the low possibility of surpassing it. (Because the mecha used for basic control assessments were the most primitive three types of mecha, the crudeness of the mecha had also limited Ling Xiao's performance.)

But is this possible? Everyone knew that all the mecha training hall provided were the most primitive mecha; no one could get their hands on any better mecha. So, there would never be a scenario where, using the same type of mecha, someone would be able to break Ling Xiao's record...

Ling Lan did not know that they had swept the whole virtual world into animated discussion. After she and the cheetah mecha operator had thoroughly studied and

experimented with their bestial mecha, they had then switched to avian mecha, and had finally chosen humanoid mecha.

When they had become fully proficient in the basic control of all three main types of mecha, Ling Lan used a humanoid mecha in the learning space to pass the tunnel mission. After she passed, the long-absent Instructor Number Three appeared once more, and this time, he immediately told Ling Lan to make preparations — tomorrow, she would officially begin following him to learn the beginner level techniques and movements.

When Ling Lan heard this, she almost raised her arms and cheered; she laughed loudly three times ³ to celebrate her progress to the next stage. It should be noted that continuous training in just the basic controls was really boring and hence tiring. If she had been alone, she might have already gone ahead long ago and graduated to the real mecha world to seek out newer and more interesting pursuits. But when she saw the cheetah mecha operator practising the basic mecha controls with such a serious attitude, Ling Lan had no choice but to carry on and persist. Dammit, how could she, a mature older woman, lose to this little green spring onion of a youth before her...

(A certain pretty boy youth who had just logged off was cheering himself on at the same time: to be the strongest mecha operator in this world, he could not lose to anyone else. Since the rabbit mecha could train so tirelessly in the basic controls without complaint, then he must be able to do it too! He must hold on and persist!)

It had to be said that, at times, some misunderstandings were extremely beautiful. The two of them felt that the other's attitude was very serious and very tenacious, and so they both did not want to lose to the other... in this way, the two of them persisted together through mastering these extremely dry and boring basic mecha control exercises!

Chapter 129

Missed It?

The next day, Ling Lan rushed to log on to the virtual world in her excitement. She swiftly chose her rabbit mecha and was loaded into the mecha training hall, prepared to seek out the cheetah mecha operator to tell him the good news. Hell yeah, she could finally say bye-bye to basic control training!

However, she was quickly pinned down by horror. If the mecha could faithfully mimic what Ling Lan felt at that moment, we would see the rabbit mecha shiver from head to tail, all its hairs standing on end.

Apparently, Ling Lan had unwittingly turned on the mecha's viewing screen, only to be faced with two large black holes staring at her unblinkingly. Those black holes were really just too dark, too dim, and too vacant, causing pins and needles to break out all over Ling Lan's scalp.

"Hells, why did you have to lie down right in front of me!" raged Ling Lan, immediately jumping up to kick and punch at the other.

And so a rabbit was seen waving a carrot around violently, whacking a cheetah lounging lazily on the ground before it. This love-filled scene caused all the surrounding newbies to turn and look, extremely curious — what was this legendary rabbit-cheetah duo doing now?

Helplessly, the cheetah used its claws to block the rabbit's tantrum, and said somewhat dully, "Stop being angry, I have something to tell you."

Eh? He had something to tell her too? Blankly, Ling Lan pulled back her carrot and placed it in the rabbit's mouth for safekeeping. Then, she plopped down beside the cheetah, and waited patiently for the other to speak.

The cheetah was silent for a moment, before saying gloomily, "I just wanted to tell you that, I have to take the assessment and graduate today." Saying this, the cheetah was telling Ling Lan that this time, he would choose to graduate and leave the mecha training hall, and head off into the real mecha world.

The cheetah mecha operator actually felt as if he were doing a great wrong to the rabbit mecha operator — if it had not been for the rabbit mecha operator, he would not have ever been able to obtain such great improvement in his mecha control. After this period of training, he now fully understood the reason why basic control was so important. He was very grateful to Ling Lan, and this gratefulness just added to his guilt for leaving first on his own.

Ah? So coincidental? She was just thinking of leaving, and now the other actually needed to leave as well. In that instant, Ling Lan had the sudden feeling that the synchronicity between the two of them was really rather abnormal.

"Uh... I actually wanted to say that too — that I wanted to take the assessment and graduate." Due to surprise, Ling Lan paused for a few seconds before finally spilling the words that she had wanted to say to the cheetah mecha operator.

However, this odd pause of a few seconds made the cheetah mecha operator misunderstand the situation. He thought that Ling Lan was intentionally lying to him just to comfort him. Mind you, to break Ling Xiao's graduation assessment record, it was still somewhat difficult at their current skill level. The cheetah mecha operator had always thought that Ling Lan had been staying behind in the mecha training hall because she needed to complete the mission of breaking that record. At one point, he even suspected that this was a mission assigned by Ling Lan's mentor's sect...

So, when Ling Lan suddenly changed this stance of hers, saying that she wanted to take a final assessment and graduate as well, in the cheetah mecha operator's eyes, this was obviously for his sake. This made him feel touched and ashamed at the same time.

Such a great teacher and good friend, but because of his promise with his grandfather, he was not able to reveal his true identity and appearance to the other... The guilt in the cheetah mecha's heart just grew and grew, and his reluctance to leave just became stronger and stronger.

"Sorry!" A torrent of emotions, and in the end he could only condense them into this most common of words.

"I'm speaking truthfully..." Ling Lan was somewhat speechless. Dearie, you're really overthinking this.

"Due to some issues in the real world, I need to leave the mecha training hall to go to the real mecha world. I'm really very sorry."

"Honestly, I'm not lying..." said Ling Lan moodily. Why wouldn't he believe her?

"I know! Thank you!" The cheetah mecha operator abruptly cut off what Ling Lan was saying, thanked her sincerely, and then before Ling Lan could respond, he had already chosen to enter his graduation assessment...

Seeing the cheetah mecha disappear in an instant, fleeing under duress from his own perceived guilt, Ling Lan almost flipped the table in anger. Hells, that bastard! Couldn't he have listened to her properly before leaving?

A long while later, Ling Lan, who had regained her composure, suddenly burst into laughter. For the first time, she found — so the cheetah mecha operator had had such an obstinate side to him. Also, that fellow had really just been too good at letting his imagination run away with him.

Still, Ling Lan could feel the stirrings of regret in her heart. After all, the cheetah mecha operator was the first person in this world who had given her the true feeling of a friend; but unfortunately, the two of them just hadn't met at the right time. Both of them were hiding their respective identities, and so, in the end, they could only become strangers with the greatest rapport.

"Little Four, go take a look at his result." This time, Ling Lan did not want to go and disturb the other's assessment, especially since she knew that the other already harboured some guilty feelings towards her. Ling Lan felt that it was a bit of a pity — honestly, she really wanted to part on good terms with the cheetah mecha.

Very quickly, Little Four had returned to tell her the cheetah mecha's final assessment result. His time was just 2 seconds away from Ling Xiao's record, and this result was enough to leave his mark on history as the overall fifth place.

In the end, Little Four told Ling Lan that the other's brainwaves had truly disappeared from this mission space. In other words, he had indeed left the mecha training hall's world to enter a different virtual space.

Little Four asked if Ling Lan wanted to continue tracking the other to see where he landed in the other virtual space, but after some thought, Ling Lan declined. It was just as she had thought earlier — the two of them had met at an inopportune time. How

would they have been able to continue maintaining their friendship when they were unable to face each other with their real identities?

"What a shame. If he's around, Boss, your mecha control would definitely improve even faster," Little Four would forever consider things from a perspective which benefitted Ling Lan most.

"You should know that, if it's truly gold, it will definitely shine one day," said Ling Lan enigmatically.

What the heck did Boss mean? Little Four was immediately struck by a wave of dizziness. He hurriedly ran a search on Boss's statement, and instantly understood. So Boss had meant that the other would never be able to escape from the palm of Boss's hand! 133t Boss owns¹! Flower shower²!

Ling Lan ignored Little Four's mistaken comprehension, immediately choosing to take her final assessment. She entered the mission space belonging to her, and cheered herself on mentally: "I mustn't lose to that punk!"

Countless runs of the assessment had let Ling Lan and the other experience almost every assessment map; this time, the map selected was coincidentally a map Ling Lan had run before. Ling Lan closed her eyes softly, and she could clearly visualize every obstacle of the assessment mission in her mind...

The mecha sounded the last few alerts to signify the start of the assessment. When only two seconds remained on the countdown, Ling Lan abruptly opened her eyes, and a radiant spark of light flashed across her eyes.

Finally, the start sound rang out, and Ling Lan's rabbit mecha could be seen rushing out like the wind. Among the irregularly moving obstacles, it was leaping and dancing freely, just like an ephemeral shadow, a play of light, sometimes visible sometimes not.

Meanwhile, inside the cockpit, Ling Lan's expression was exceptionally relaxed — her eyes were half-lidded, and the movements of her fingers did not give off any sense of urgency like they used to. Instead, her movements seemed almost casual, sometimes creating afterimages without conscious thought. This made her hands seem like they were performing a graceful dance, choreographing an absolutely beautiful piece of her own.

Subconsciously, Ling Lan also used instantaneous preset control mode — her

understanding of this map made it the obvious thing to do, so she included the preset controls without any fuss whatsoever. With that, Ling Lan had entered a sort of heavenly realm of control, causing Little Four to be both shocked and overjoyed at Ling Lan's great luck.

This situation clearly proved that Boss Ling Lan's control skills were about to ascend by yet another level. Perhaps, this time, she would finally be able to achieve the lowest hand speed required by her dad...

"Congratulations, you've successfully created a new record! The secondary world shall now commence a world-wide notification, please select whether to publicize your name or to remain anonymous?"

Seeing that Ling Lan was still immersed in the insights she had gained in that control session, Little Four quickly helped Ling Lan choose to stay anonymous. Even though no one would be able to trace it back to Boss's real identity if they chose to publicize the name of her avatar, there would still be some risk involved. Little Four constantly took Ling Lan's words to heart, so he now knew to make sure to protect himself well first in all endeavours.

Once Little Four had made the selection, within the virtual world, everyone who was online could hear a voice from the main system: *Congratulations, XXX, for successfully creating a new basic mecha control graduation result record! Each generation brings forth new talent, this stable world has finally welcomed a new era of change!*

When everyone heard this, a great furore broke out. Those who knew about the rabbit-cheetah duo were all guessing whether it was one of them who had broken the record. Some people even logged off right then in their excitement, rushing to use their communicators in the real world to contact their friends who were still inside the realm of the mecha training hall to find out more.

However, the response they received was that their friends did not know anything either. Of the few who had been coincidentally browsing the assessment name list at the time, none had seen any sign of the rabbit mecha or the cheetah mecha.

It turned out that, to ensure confidentiality, Little Four had removed Ling Lan from the list of observable assessments the moment she started her assessment. In other words, no one would have been able to see Ling Lan's assessment.

Thus, the only one who knew the truth was the cheetah mecha. Frankly, when the cheetah mecha operator had heard this system announcement, his first reaction was that it must be the rabbit mecha. Following that thought, he chuckled wryly and said to himself, "So you could have graduated and left a long time ago... Hanging out at the training hall for so long, you were probably just waiting for me. But in the end, I still let you down." In low spirits, he immediately chose to leave the mecha world.

In a private manor, a major-domo was patiently waiting for his young master to log off. However, as time passed and the login pod remained closed, he suddenly thought of something and leapt forward to pry open the login pod forcefully from the outside. All he saw inside, though, was a pretty young man crying silently.

"Why are you crying, Young Master? Did something happen?" The major-domo was flustered. His young master was an extremely strong child — previously, when his body was in a bad condition, even if the pain was unbearable, he would still face others with a smile, never crying or showing his pain.

The pretty young man opened his eyes; his typically bright and steady gaze now seemed a bit lost and confused. Just as the major-domo was about to ask, the pretty youth suddenly spoke, "Major-domo, why did grandpa insist that I can only tell others my real identity and appearance after I turn twenty? Just why?"

If it weren't for this promise, he would not have chosen to leave the rabbit mecha operator. Then, he wouldn't have to feel this heartache — so losing a friend was such a painful thing.

The major-domo opened and closed his mouth several times, but in the end he could only recite that old fallback, "Young Master, you'll find out later on!"

"Later on? Hehe, sometimes, what's missed is missed, gone forever... Major-domo, do you know? Just earlier, I've missed what should have been my most important best friend in this life!" said the pretty boy ³ amidst bitter laughter, his tears spilling over silently once more. His expression was pained, and it was overshadowed with a deep sadness for not being able to control his own destiny. It was only at this time that he was truly acting like the 13 year old kid he was.

Chapter 130

It's Been Tough On You!

Ling Lan had broken her dad Ling Xiao's basic control graduation record. This greatly surprised Ling Lan — despite her joy, she knew very well that this was the result of a fortuitous accident. If it weren't for the fact that she had been familiar with this assessment map, she would not have been confident enough to use the instantaneous preset control mode. And then, to stumble by chance into the extremely rare Celestial Realm... her results were actually about the same as the cheetah mecha operator's — at most, her best performance would have just beaten his by one second. All we can say is that as a time-traveller, she had been given a direct hack by the God of Time Travel.

Still, this hack had caused Ling Lan's control ability and hand speed to ascend by yet another level. Ling Lan couldn't help but sigh in awe at how unfairly intense the Celestial Realm hack was — actually pushing her abilities up by one level immediately.

In order to fully absorb and master her new hand speed as well as the control realm brought on by the Celestial Realm, Ling Lan immediately chose to isolate herself. She headed straight into the learning space to soak in her new insights.

The Celestial Realm did not bestow this increase in ability to a person directly; it only temporarily brought out a person's best possible state at that moment in time. To really obtain these ability gains, it all depended on one's effort in understanding and reflection, to seriously learn these new limits and make them one's own. Otherwise, as more time passed, the insights given by the Celestial Realm would drift away with the wind, leaving no trace behind. At that time, one's control ability and hand speed would revert to its original state.

Ling Lan spent over a month taking in these insights within the learning space, but outside, only a few hours had passed.

When Ling Lan finally stepped out from the virtual login pod, the aura of her body had changed slightly. The initially frigid and somewhat pressing air around her had diminished a little, no longer feeling as cold as before.

Over the past few years, as Ling Lan's combat ability grew stronger and stronger, the endless killing missions in the learning space had caused the killing intent around her to become thicker and thicker. If Little Four hadn't tried his best to help her suppress this blood-soaked killing intent, her classmates who were slightly weaker wouldn't have been able to approach her at all. And even if Qi Long and the others got close, they would only be able to stand up straight with difficulty, they wouldn't be able to move.

Of course, if that had happened, Ling Lan would certainly fall under the suspicion of the academy teachers and the monitoring military personnel. After all, the students in grades one to three shouldn't have had any real battle experience; only starting from the fourth grade would they be sent out on hunting assignments. How could a child who had never seen true bloodshed possess such a thick blood-red killing intent?

However, as Ling Lan's killing intent grew even thicker and thicker, Little Four also found it harder and harder to hold it back. In the end, a little bit of it escaped, but fortunately, at that time, Ling Lan was going through her icy slackface period. Therefore, even if she emanated a cold aura that chilled the hearts of others, it was still somewhat explainable. This had let Ling Lan safely avoid the suspicion of the military monitors once more.

Little Four was the first to sense the ebbing of Ling Lan's icy air. He instantly threw confetti into the air in celebration. He had been so worried that if the killing intent continued to increase, he would not have been able to hold it back any longer. It had been on the brink of happening — but now, they had dodged a bullet once again.

In a great mood, Ling Lan indulged herself with a great feast. Her title of 'glutton' had never changed, and she was even eating more than before. However, by now, Ling Lan's mum, Lan Luofeng, had already gotten used to the sight of her daughter guzzling down food like a black hole. This was normal. The day when Ling Lan ate less — now *that* would be a catastrophe, a sign that the Armageddon had arrived.

Several days passed, and Ling Lan, having received some great news, was rather distracted. She actually began to drift off inside the learning space, mind busily calculating the passing rate of time outside compared to time inside the learning space. This 'physically here but mentally elsewhere' behaviour thoroughly enraged Instructor Number Three, who had been in the middle of teaching Ling Lan some F-

grade¹ mecha moves. He immediately kicked Ling Lan out of the mecha training space, sending her to stare blankly alone in the great hall of the learning space.

Hells, if she didn't want to learn, then he didn't want to teach either! Instructor Number Three's tsundere² side was triggered!

However, there was a legitimate reason for Ling Lan's inattentiveness today. It was because in the Central Scout Academy, a course that she had been anticipating for a long time was finally here — outdoor hunting.

This outdoor hunting wasn't just running around in a forest — using slingshots to shoot at wild chickens and wild ducks — that sort of boring thing. No. It was a full three months of wilderness survival training on some random primitive planet.

Of course, they were still only 10 year old kids, so the academy would not throw them straight off into some terrifying hell-hole to hunt. At most, they would only be sent to an area with some elementary-class wild beasts with low combat ability for training. At Ling Lan's current level of strength, handling those low-level beasts with trash strength was really not much different than killing wild chickens and ducks to her.

But... that was not the main point. The main point was that they were going to another planet. This meant that Ling Lan would finally be able to take a ride on a spaceship like in the stories she had read ← This was the true reason for Ling Lan's excitement. Darling, did you get that?

In short, our country bumpkin Ling Lan could finally ride a real starship to take a trip into space. So, she just had no way of staying calm. It's just like when we were in primary school, and the teacher had announced a field trip for the first time, we would have been so worked up and excited that we would not be able to sleep the night before...

The moment Ling Lan saw she had been kicked out of the mecha learning space, without even thinking about it, she immediately exited the learning space. She lifted the communicator by her pillow to look at the time. Er... it's still too early, only about 4 a.m. in the morning...

But Ling Lan just couldn't sleep anymore. She climbed out of bed, put on her communicator, and checked her luggage once more:

Weapons: Two magnetic alloy daggers! To the outside world, Ling Lan had always

been a right-handed weapon wielder, but in truth, she was better at wielding weapons with her left hand than her right. This dual-wielding ability had been trained under Instructor Number Five — Number Five had said that, a trump that is hidden will always be one's strongest trump card.

Rumour had it that this time, the academy would actually give everyone a beam gun as an emergency backup; the students had all begun learning how to use beam guns since they were in third grade. Ling Lan's shooting skills were not bad, but they definitely weren't top-tier. On this front, both Han Jijyun and Lin Zhong-qing were clearly better than her — their sheer natural talent in shooting was astounding.

Thus, this time, she also brought along an extremely covert weapon — a bracelet specially prepared for her by Chamberlain Ling Qin. Ling Lan carefully placed the bracelet on her right wrist. She looked at the metallic sheen of its deep black colour, common-looking yet serving a suitably decorative purpose, and nodded in satisfaction.

This was indeed that ultra-strong, unbreakable, ultra-thin rope that Chamberlain Ling Qin had used during in that ambush several years ago. It was an indispensable tool for killing people, crossing distances, and rock climbing. With this at hand, Ling Lan would be able to handle certain difficult situations with ease.

Of course, Ling Lan's bag was mostly filled with nutrient solutions of varying flavours (the results of her research), recovery fluids, and first-aid medications. At this time, she was somewhat annoyed — oh why couldn't the learning space come with some storage functions? If it did, then she would have been able to bring enough of all the things she might need, and wouldn't have to fret about what she should and shouldn't bring.

Because all these things would have to be with them at all times, if they brought more than what they would be able to bear, their hunting ability would decline sharply. At that point, they wouldn't be the ones hunting anymore, rather, they would be hunted by the wild beasts instead.

Ling Lan also did not forget to bring some changes of clothes. At this moment, she was atypically glad that she was a fake man. Because she had been injected with suppression shots, her body was in an undeveloped state. Thus, she didn't have to worry at all about menstruation or any of the other host of embarrassing issues related to puberty. And from that, she also wouldn't have to worry about being

endangered by these problems in the outdoors either, things like attracting attacks from the wild beasts due to the stench of blood...

Just like that, after much study and much cutting down, she finally completed her packing. By this time, the sky was already fully bright. Ling Lan took a quick shower, and then walked out of her room in high spirits.

When Ling Lan arrived at the classroom of grade 4 Special Class-A, she found that she was one of the last few to arrive. It looked like she wasn't the only one who was excited.

"Boss Lan, over here, over here!" An energetic voice rang out from a corner of the classroom. Without even having to lift her head, Ling Lan could already tell who it was. The only people who would yell out to her so passionately — other than Qi Long, there was only Lin Zhong-qing. Qi Long's voice was louder, however, so his voice was still quite distinctive.

After following Qi Long around for two years, Lin Zhong-qing had lost almost all of his initial gloomy personality. Instead, he was as enthusiastic and full of smiles as he had been at the start of school, when he had served her for one month. However, Ling Lan knew very well that this was just a facade Lin Zhong-qing was holding up against the outside world; inside, it wasn't that simple.

Still, Ling Lan did not caution Qi Long and the others about this. It was up to them to decide their own relationships — whether good or bad, only they themselves would know.

Ling Lan lifted her head to look, and saw Lin Zhong-qing standing by his seat, waving at her.

Ling Lan walked over with an indifferent expression. As a girl, she really had no clue how to interact with these little boys, and so could only use this sort of macho-cool image to handle the situation. In any case, this group of kids seemed to be eating it up.

"Boss Lan, I've bought you breakfast," said Lin Zhong-qing, smiling, as he passed over a box on the table.

Ling Lan swept a look over the scene, and saw that Han Jijyun and Luo Lang were both sitting at their own places with identical boxes, eating delicately. Seated on top of his

desk, Qi Long was also holding a box, and was wolfing down its contents unreservedly.

Looks like Lin Zhong-qing hadn't just prepared breakfast for her. Ling Lan accepted the box and opened it. It turned out to be the golden soup dumplings ³ which were extremely hard to get within the academy. It looked like Lin Zhong-qing had gone to the canteen super early to line up just to get these — he had truly put in a lot of effort.

Ling Lan used her chopsticks to prod at the soup dumplings in her lunch box, and said coolly, "It's been tough on you! ⁴"

Though Ling Lan had said this almost casually, Lin Zhong-qing's face was painted with a trace of pleasant surprise. Even the ravenously eating Qi Long behind him raised his head in surprise, surreptitiously using an elbow to nudge Lin Zhong-qing lightly, congratulating him for finally getting acknowledgement from Boss Lan.

He used a full two years, only to get this simple sentence... Lin Zhong-qing's mind was a mixed bag of emotions — for a moment, he actually wasn't sure whether he was happy or resentful...

Right then, a classmate suddenly rushed into the classroom, obviously emotional, shouting, "Big news! Big news!"

Wu Jiong and Ye Xu had been chatting at one side. When they heard this cry, they jerked, and quickly turned to look at the student who had shouted.

"It's likely that our outdoor hunting course this time may be cancelled..." The moment the student entered, he shared the bad news with everyone. This caused all the students to become anxious — they had already waited for this day for so long, could everything be cancelled at the last moment?

"What happened exactly? And where did you hear this news?" Seeing that Qi Long had no intentions of asking, Wu Jiong had no choice but to speak up himself and ask.

Chapter 131

Planet Azure

Qi Long was the spokesperson for Ling Lan's group — since Qi Long did not ask, that meant Ling Lan's group had no interest in the proceedings. But just because Ling Lan's group had no interest did not mean that Wu Jiong himself was not interested.

"I heard that the seventh grade virtual world barrier-crossing award was taken away by the academy of another planet. When the dean found out, he was really, really angry, so he called an emergency meeting now with all the teachers." The student informant had a dejected expression on his face; he too had been eagerly anticipating the extracurricular activity this time. "Now it looks like there won't be time for them to take us hunting outdoors."

The student informant had answered so readily and in so much detail, because the one who asked had been Wu Jiong. He was the team leader of one of the three major teams in Class-A, after all. If the student could gain Wu Jiong's favour and thus get the opportunity to join his team, then he would be set.

Although there were quite a few other established teams in Class-A, there were only three teams which the currently still teamless students really wanted to join. As Li Yingjie's team was now full, his was out — but the few remaining slots on the other two teams were being eyed closely by those students.

Ling Lan's team was very strict in their requirements, due to having only one final slot left. Everyone knew that, to enter Ling Lan's team, the difficulty level was scarily high — not only did one's talent have to be exceptional, one also had to be some sort of an all-rounder. Those who knew their own limitations decisively put their sights on Wu Jiong's team. At the very least, Wu Jiong's requirement for joining was not as high as Ling Lan's team's. And furthermore, his team had two slots remaining, so no matter what, the chances for success were naturally much higher. This caused Wu Jiong's team to receive much more attention than Ling Lan's team in Class-A.

"Which planet's scout academy managed to pull that off?" asked Ye Xu, extremely curious.

"It was planet Azure!" The student informant's answer stunned all the students in the class. Planet Azure was a third-rate planet — the resources they had there were N-levels worse than theirs here... could it be that an unparalleled prodigy had appeared there?

When Li Yingjie, who had initially been unconcerned by the discussion, heard the term 'planet Azure', his face paled drastically, as if thinking of something. He hurriedly asked, "Do you know who the people who crossed the barrier were?" A team was necessary to pass the barrier mission, which was why Li Yingjie asked this question.

The student informant shook his head regretfully, "I only overheard these few things when I passed by two teachers discussing the issue on the way here. I heard that the planet Azure students pushed through the barrier before 5am this morning, successfully becoming the first team to pass the barrier mission this year. After that, I didn't dare to stay back and listen anymore, so I'm not clear on who those people are."

"For the details, the teachers would probably know." The other students also began noisily discussing the matter.

Right then, a clear voice rang out from the classroom door, "That's right, I indeed do know..." It turned out that their Special Class-A homeroom teacher Cheng Yuanhang had arrived.

"Good day, Teacher Cheng!" Seeing Cheng Yuanhang enter the classroom, all the students obediently returned to their seats. They then stood primly at attention and greeted their teacher.

Cheng Yuanhang indicated for the students to sit down, and then he announced, "I have two things to tell you all. Firstly, do not worry, the original plans for outdoor hunting will not change. We will be leaving today as planned!" Cheng Yuanhang's words caused the entire class to cheer in unison; mind you, they had been waiting a really long time for this day.

"However, this time round, your hunting quota and difficulty level will be much harder compared to that of the previous years. All of this will depend on your performance on the field, even the smallest quota must be more than half times more than the previous years' quota." Cheng Yuanhang's following words raised a furore among the Class-A students — what was the meaning of this?

"In other words, your class's outdoor hunting duration will be extended to 5 or 6 months..." added Cheng Yuanhang. This drew a new wave of indignant objections from the students — yes, they had wanted to experience the thrill of some bloody sport, but they had never wanted to remain butchers for so long on a primitive planet!

"Teacher, why did you all decide to make things this way?" asked Ye Xu angrily. This way of doing things was obviously a little unfair by academy standards. In the academy, it was permitted to raise objections, as long as you backed it up with logic and, of course, strength.

"Why?" Cheng Yuanhang's expression darkened. He slammed his palm onto his desk, the loud noise instantly silencing the clamouring students in the class. The classroom became dead silent.

"Ever since our Central Scout Academy was established, we have never once lost the seventh grade virtual world barrier-crossing award, but this year, we lost it. Before we could pass the barrier mission, the scout academy of the distant third-rate planet Azure broke through it... This is a disgrace for our Central Scout Academy, and also a disgrace upon you all..."

At this point, Cheng Yuanhang's tone eased slightly, "Have you all considered the reason? Why we failed? Is it because we have been blinded by the glories of our past, so we did not see the relentless pursuit of the other scout academies? Today, at the group meeting of the academy teachers, what the dean said was right — we thrive by strife and die by leisure! If we do not wake up, our Central Scout Academy will lose its former glory, and become eliminated by the changing of the times."

"So, we've decided to take this experience to heart and no longer take it easy... So, congratulations, from now onwards, you all shall receive the full force of our education. We won't let you all have time to think of any nonsense... we will make sure to squeeze out every bit of latent potential you have in you." Cheng Yuanhang's words caused a chill to settle deep in the bones of the students; it felt as if a great calamity was upon them.

Ling Lan propped up her chin with one hand, a trace of a smile on her lips. She had long felt that the academy was setting their overall standards too low for the students. This was also one of the reasons why her strength just kept getting further and further from that of these children. Luckily, Qi Long and the others had been hanging around her, and so had not been held back by the academy's education standards.

Still, Ling Lan also understood the academy's caution. After all, at this age, the children were still growing — if they went overboard with training, it may cause long-term damage to their bodies. The academy did not dare gamble with that.

"So that's why we will be getting additional training on all fronts." Wu Jiong understood now. He threw a glance at the pleased look on Ling Lan's face, and somehow understood a bit better why the other was so exceptional. His training load was probably much much more than theirs... if that was really the case, then he too would not lose to the other.

"Yes, from now on, the Central Scout Academy shall increase the mission load of every grade by two times or more. If the seventh grade of next year loses again, then we'll continue increasing the load," declared Cheng Yuanhang with a cold smile. This was the academy's decision. If they wanted to have better days, then they would have to hope that next year's seventh grade would do better.

"Teacher Cheng, do you know exactly which people were on that team which passed the barrier mission?" Li Yingjie could hold back no longer, speaking up to ask what he was most concerned about.

Cheng Yuanhang stared at him with a half-smile. Li Yingjie felt as if his thoughts had been read by the teacher, but he really wanted to know the answer. If his elder cousin brother was among those people, that would mean that his hopes of replacing his cousin as the first inheritor in line was almost impossible.

"You don't have to concern yourself over this. All you need to do is work hard to complete the assignments given by the academy." Cheng Yuanhang did not give a straight answer, instead advising Li Yingjie to focus on his own issues.

"I only want to know whether there is someone called Li Mulan ¹ among them," asked Li Yingjie doggedly.

Cheng Yuanhang's brows furrowed. He glanced at the somewhat emotional Li Yingjie, and thought for a moment before saying, "There was indeed one person with the surname Li." Li Yingjie's face drained of colour in an instant, but then Cheng Yuanhang continued to say, "But I remember that that person was called Li Lanfeng ²!"

"Li Lanfeng?! It's fine if it's not him." Li Yingjie's face regained its usual complexion. If it wasn't the name that he feared it would be, then it didn't matter who broke past the

barrier.

"Alright, if there are no questions, everyone follow me to the plaza to assemble," said Cheng Yuanhang, seeing that the students were mostly settled. With that, he brought the grade four Class-A students to the central plaza of the Central Scout Academy.

Along the way, jet-rollers filled the skies — everyone was riding their jet-rollers to follow their homeroom teachers to the central plaza. Ling Lan thought to herself, perhaps this was why jet-rollers were prized so highly in the academy — when it came to this sort of mass movement, it would have been rather inefficient without the help of jet-rollers.

At this moment, there were already quite a lot of people at the plaza. All the grade four students would be going out to hunt today; only the areas they were assigned to were different.

Ling Lan abruptly noticed that the quiet skies directly above the plaza were filled with countless small shuttle-like spaceships. This scene made Ling Lan feel once again as if she were inside a science fiction world... well, fine, her whole existence right now was totally a science fiction.

Ling Lan saw something that wasn't usually here around the plaza — there were several large hovering platforms. Right then, on some of the platforms, there were already some students who had arrived earlier. From the platforms, the students were boarding those little spaceships one by one.

Once everyone was inside, the doors of the spaceship would close, turning it into an airtight elliptical shuttle. Then, with a whoosh, the spaceship would zoom off. That instantaneous burst of speed was definitely as high as 0.5 mach.

Cheng Yuanhang brought them to a platform relatively taller and wider than the rest. The moment all the students were on the platform, a large red-painted spaceship flew over and stopped before them.

On the body of the spaceship, the words 'Central Scout Academy Special Class-A' were actually painted on it. Ling Lan sweatdropped — did Class-A even have its own exclusive spaceship? Looks like the academy had really invested a lot in making sure the students felt the distinction of being strong.

The interior of the spaceship was very large. There were three round tables in the

centre, and positioned angularly around each of the tables were six padded armchairs. The other seats were all scattered haphazardly around the three large round tables. Clearly, the academy also wanted to emphasize the elevated status of the strong even within the class itself, pushing the concept of survival of the fittest to the very max.

The students lined up and boarded the ship in an organised fashion. Those students who entered first but were not from the three major teams all consciously left the seats around the three tables open.

Ling Lan was the first member of the three major teams to enter. With one look, she gleaned what this arrangement was all about. Without any reservations, she sat in one of the armchairs around one of the tables; Qi Long and the others of her team followed her lead and sat around the same table.

This was their position. Within the scout academy, there was no such thing as giving way out of modesty; to do so would just invite contempt.

Chapter 132

Thoroughly Convinced!

Wu Jiong, who entered soon after, looked at Ling Lan seated on the right, and with a smile, he moved to sit at the round table to the left of Ling Lan's. Ye Xu and the other members of his team followed him.

It had to be said that the positions Ling Lan and Wu Jiong had chosen were the best of the three tables. Their tables were positioned closest to the big screen, while the position of the other table was obviously not as good as theirs, its line of sight being partially blocked by them.

The spaceship's screen displayed the scenery outside. The passengers could enjoy drinks while viewing the scenery outside; Ling Lan, who was extremely curious about everything, would naturally be unwilling to get a lesser seat.

Han Jijyun seemed to be very familiar with spaceships. He tugged on the arm of Lin Zhong-qing, who was also staring around in awe like a country bumpkin, indicating for him to follow him. From who knows where, they found some iced canned drinks, and together they brought the drinks over to the rest of Ling Lan's group.

This caused the other children to look on in envy, but they did not dare to follow suit. Having never set foot on a spaceship before, they really were unsure where they could get those drinks, and there were no service staff or customer service etcetera on hand to help them. If they messed up and caused some trouble by any chance... that would be troublesome.

Ling Lan used her the pad of her index finger to rub gently in a circle around the top of her can, luxuriating in the chill given off by the body of the can. Although the weather now wasn't extremely hot, being able to enjoy a cool refreshing drink like this was still a true pleasure.

Ling Lan glanced at Han Jijyun, who was currently talking with Qi Long. Sensing her stare, Han Jijyun turned to look and saw Ling Lan looking at him. So, he raised the drink in his hand and gave it a slight shake in her direction. Moreover, his expression was somewhat teasing in nature.

Ling Lan's lips quirked. "Your family's intelligence is very accurate, eh?"

A light flashed through Han Jijyun's eyes, and his lips split into a quick grin. Shamelessly, he said, "Boss, isn't this all just to serve you better?"

Ling Lan couldn't help but laugh. She held onto the can in her hand, and raised it to knock lightly against the other's canned drink, signalling her acceptance. The two of them lifted their heads in unison and took a drink. Their eyes met — everything that needed to be said was conveyed in silence.

Ling Lan knew very well that, with these actions, Han Jijyun was telling her which stratum he came from... the Intelligence Agency? What a scheming brat. If Little Four had not gathered detailed information on all of them early on and passed it to her, Han Jijyun's subtle hint this time might have really just flown over her head.

Is it because some things just can't be said out loud? Especially with his special family background, Han Jijyun was clearly much more 'black-bellied'¹ than before. Looks like cultivating him into the team's brain would not be a problem.

Han Jijyun was satisfied; the smile on his lips deepened. This once again proved that Boss Ling Lan was an intelligent person that only needed a small hint to understand everything. This time, by bringing out the drinks — firstly, he wanted to tell Ling Lan about his family situation; and secondly, it was out of a small selfish wish to test Ling Lan.

Originally, Han Jijyun had acknowledged Ling Lan as boss largely because of his childhood friend Qi Long. Because Qi Long was determined to follow Ling Lan with all his heart, as his best mate, Han Jijyun could only bite the bullet and follow him.

As they grew up year by year, Han Jijyun asked himself more than once — could he really follow Ling Lan with all his heart like Qi Long, acknowledging him as his boss? Han Jijyun knew very well that if he could not be truly sincere in his loyalty, forcing it would eventually lead to a split one day due to a conflict of interest. If that happened, both sides would be hurt, so he might as well make things clear now and rebuild their relationship. Perhaps then, their relationship could be more permanent.

Han Jijyun did not deny that Ling Lan's strength was extraordinary — in terms of combat, he had never seen anyone else as talented as Ling Lan — it was like he was a

peerless prodigy born for the sole purpose of fighting. This was also the reason why Qi Long was so deathly loyal to Ling Lan; as a battle maniac, of course he would idolize this unparalleled combat genius.

But Han Jijyun knew that he wasn't like Qi Long; he wasn't that obsessed with combat. Compared to fighting, he much preferred studying all kinds of space campaigns. The various unusual space strategies drew him in completely, and he was also deeply interested in starship command. Thus, Ling Lan would not be able to receive his submission with just combat ability alone. Han Jijyun liked to use his head, so he hoped to find someone who could out-think him to submit to.

However, in these past few years, Ling Lan's cool attitude towards Lin Zhong-qing made Han Jijyun feel that Ling Lan was not a simple person. Han Jijyun understood that Ling Lan must know that Lin Zhong-qing was not simply what he appeared to be, which was why she was treating him so coldly. Han Jijyun had sensed Lin Zhong-qing's duplicity because of his experience from staying by his father all those years before he came to school. Still, as long as Lin Zhong-qing did not do anything to harm them, he also would not be mean and expose him.

In any case, the matter of Lin Zhong-qing proved that Ling Lan was definitely not a simple-minded person. This made Han Jijyun extremely happy, even starting to feel that following Ling Lan just like this wasn't too bad after all. However, it still wasn't enough to secure his full loyalty. In order to resolve this matter as soon as possible, he intentionally arranged this hint-laden scene. If Ling Lan did not catch the hint, of course Han Jijyun would not give up so easily — he would give Ling Lan three chances. If Ling Lan did not sense anything for all three times, then he could only regretfully tell Ling Lan about his position.

Unexpectedly, Ling Lan's response was so rapid that he was rather shocked — this truly proved that he and Qi Long had not chosen the wrong boss. At the very first hint, Ling Lan had got it, even using doublespeak to point out his background. He was thoroughly convinced now. This proved that Ling Lan was very likely much more astute than he had thought...

The final clinking of cans was his promise to Ling Lan that he, Han Jijyun, would only recognise Ling Lan as boss in this life from now on, with no more reservations.

Ling Lan had not known that Han Jijyun had been struggling over this issue. Frankly, she had never taken Qi Long's and Han Jijyun's acknowledgements as boss too

seriously, thinking that these were just the playful words of children. What she didn't know was that the children of this world all matured way too early; they took their promises extremely seriously, and would never break them easily.

Ling Lan's and Wu Jiong's teams each took one round table; when Li Yingjie finally showed up near the end, he saw that the two best spots had been taken by Ling Lan and Wu Jiong, and glared angrily at them. But in the end, he could do nothing but sit down sulkily at the round table behind them. Who asked him to arrive so late? There was really nothing he could say about not getting a good spot.

Cheng Yuanhang swiftly did a head count, confirming that all the students of his class had boarded the ship. Only then did he inform the spaceship pilot to depart for the spaceport.

This leg of the journey took about one hour. Ling Lan was slightly disappointed in the scenery along the way. It was okay at the beginning, when they could look down at the entire Central Scout Academy campus — Ling Lan was once again awed at just how vast the academy was. It was so unbelievably amazing, almost as large as a special-class city. But once they were high up in the air, other than white clouds there were just more white clouds. In the end, Ling Lan lost all interest in looking at the scenery, instead half reclining in her armchair with her eyes closed to rest for a bit.

They arrived at the spaceport not a second over their estimated arrival time. All of the students got off the spaceship in an organised fashion, and saw that they were now in an endlessly large spaceport. Standing at its centre looking out, one would feel as if this spaceport was vast beyond imagining. There were over ten thousand starships stopped by the gates of the port. From one gate to another, walking would require around one hour — if one goes to the wrong gate by mistake, it would be difficult to change to the right gate in time. Of course, the federal government was smart, so they made sure that countless transit trains dedicated to the various gates would appear here.

Their teacher led them to board the hover train dedicated to gate 117. The transit was quick; Ling Lan and the others arrived at their destination within 5 minutes.

When they got off this time, Ling Lan saw that a colossal and fearsome-looking cone-shaped starship was parked at gate 117. The missile heads bared to the outside proved

that this was a weaponised starship, definitely not a leisure cruiser for citizen usage. The scars left on its body by missiles just drove the point home that this was no simple starship.

Ling Lan cast a curious look at the teacher Cheng Yuanhang at the front, wondering how he had found such a fearsome starship. Mind you, this kind of battle-experienced starship couldn't possibly belong to the scout academy.

Cheng Yuanhang led the students into the starship. At the main door, a strong man stood ramrod straight. Although he wasn't dressed in military uniform, Ling Lan could still clearly sense the stamp of the military on him. It was as if the unsatisfied bloody killing intent freshly back from the battlefield still lingered around him.

"Old Lian, I didn't think it'd be you. We'll be troubling you this time." Cheng Yuanhang was extremely warm towards the other, and his tone had a clear thread of respect.

"Haha... Little Cheng, what are you saying? As long as I'm free, I just love accepting assignments from your academy. Many of my brother subordinates are from your place, you cultivated them well!" said Old Lian with a boisterous laugh, clapping a hand on Cheng Yuanhang's shoulders.

That said, he pulled Cheng Yuanhang aside subtly, and asked quietly, "Give me some hint. Of the students you've brought this time, how many are you satisfied with?"

Speechless, Cheng Yuanhang glared at him, "Don't even think about it. They're still kids."

As if having been caught harbouring some ulterior motives, Old Lian chuckled awkwardly. He did not dare to say anything further, hurriedly turning to order his subordinates in a loud voice to bring Cheng Yuanhang and his students to their waiting room.

Seeing the students disperse, Cheng Yuanhang surreptitiously pulled Old Lian aside, and indicated for the other to look in Wu Jiong's direction. "That Wu Jiong comes from a military elite family. You should know his grandfather, that support pillar of the military Wu family."

Old Lian stuck his tongue out, gasping in surprise, "Who'd have guessed that is his grandson? He should probably be the most talented one of your bunch then."

"He's not!" said Cheng Yuanhang curtly. He pointed out Qi Long and Ling Lan, and said quietly, "That boy with the silly grin, the one that's speaking so brashly... his talent is definitely no less than Wu Jiong, perhaps even better. He's called Qi Long. In fact, his father isn't a simple character either. Qi Yaoyang, you should know him, right?"

"Of course I know! That's the strongest ace operator of our Third Division mecha operators. I heard that he's about to advance to become an imperial operator this time, but who knows if that's true..." Old Lian was rather tongue-tied in his shock; the backgrounds of these kids were frankly quite frightening.

"Well, it's about time for him to ascend. At the beginning, he purposely held back and delayed his advancement just so he could be deployed successfully. After these past few years, he probably won't be able to hold back any longer." As Cheng Yuanhang had a direct line to the academy dean, his information was generally quite reliable.

Chapter 133

Sparring!

"Although we'll lose a great warrior on the battlefield, the Federation will gain an extra measure of deterrent power. I wouldn't want to see something like what happened to Major General Ling Xiao happen again." As Old Lian said this, his expression was overcast with shadows. Till now, he just could not understand — for that inconsequential battle, why had they sent out an IN mecha, the Federation's ultimate weapon, so randomly? Even more hilarious was the fact that a god-class operator, so prized by the Federation, had actually been killed so easily by the enemy nation's trap... Had the personnel of the Federal Intelligence Agency all gone to eat sh*t?

Every time he thought of the matter, rage would burn hotly in his heart. He really wanted to f*ck up those idiots who had come up with this strategy... if the Premier Head of State hadn't immediately apprehended those people for questioning, the Federation soldiers would very likely have stormed into the military to drag out all those involved and put a bullet into their brains before being appeased.

"Stop bringing up sad history. What happened with Major General Ling Xiao is a thorn in all the hearts of us people in the Federation." Cheng Yuanhang's expression dimmed. Even though ten years had passed since that incident, the citizens of the Federation still could not accept this cruel reality.

Cheng Yuanhang looked towards Ling Lan in the distance, and his complexion improved. Rallying his spirits, he said, "Those two kids I mentioned, though their talent is great, and their strength is also sufficient, still, they aren't the strongest in my class..." This one in a million prodigy could perhaps remedy their pain one day.

These words of Cheng Yuanhang's flustered Old Lian. "Ah... they still aren't the best?" He clapped a hand onto Cheng Yuanhang's shoulder roughly, and said with envy, "You little punk, how are you so lucky? The first time taking a class, and you get such exceptional young prodigies."

Cheng Yuanhang said proudly, "Don't you see what class I'm leading?..... It's Special Class-A which has gathered all the top talent within the Federation!" There was a radiant light in his eyes — thinking back, when the dean had first told him the news,

he had almost been overwhelmed with joy and surprise.

"Already said you have the devil's own luck," huffed Old Lian.

Cheng Yuanhang pretended he heard nothing, turning to point at Ling Lan, who was currently motionlessly observing the layout of the starship, and said, "There, that's the one. He's who I'm referring to. His name is Ling Lan. What do you think? Not bad, right?"

Old Lian peered intently at Ling Lan for a moment, and then could not help but rub his chin excitedly. He nodded and said, "Hn, not bad. I like that alert gaze of his. A very level-headed little fellow, isn't he? No matter how curious and excited he is, he's still putting his own safety first — it's obvious that he's trying to memorize our military formations."

"It's not just that. This kid's combat ability is also a level beyond the others. Putting it bluntly, this kid, other than lacking some physical strength, on all other fronts, the men below you... will most likely be no match for him." Cheng Yuanhang had full confidence in Ling Lan's capabilities — his tone was sure when he said this.

"How could this be?" Old Lian could believe that Ling Lan's talent was exceptional, but he definitely could not believe this claim of Cheng Yuanhang's. He felt that Cheng Yuanhang was just praising his own wares... think about it. A little brat of not even 10 years of age, no matter how insanely talented he was or how quickly he picked up combat, should still be unable to beat the battle-experienced veterans under him.

"Don't believe me? If there's a chance, just let your subordinates try him," suggested Cheng Yuanhang with a half-smile. He was obviously telling Old Lian that they were the real deal — real gold did not fear the test of fire.

Old Lian descended into a thoughtful silence. He pulled at his jaw, looking at Ling Lan with a contemplative gaze...

On the starship, six people were assigned to one room. So, Ling Lan's team directly applied to stay together. Besides Ling Lan's team, all the other teams also chose to do the same.

It wasn't long before the starship disengaged from the navigation frame, and officially

departed. Very quickly, they left the spaceport behind for the endless starry skies. This time, their space journey would take seven days for them to arrive at their destination. At the beginning, the students were still in an excited state. Eagerly watching the starry skies go by, time seemed to pass rather quickly. But after two consecutive days of the same thing, their excitement slowly waned and they calmed down. The monotonous scenery could no longer hold the children's attention; the students, who were used to the hustle and bustle of campus life, began to feel bored and restless.

As if sensing the children's boredom, the starship captain suddenly announced that a sparring match would be held between the students and the starship's crew. This reignited the students' excitement — besides sparring with other students and sometimes the teachers in the academy, the students had really never fought any other adults before.

Every child had their dreams of becoming strong. They too wanted to know how wide the gap was between them and grown adults in terms of combat ability.

Qi Long was a pure battle maniac — hearing this news, he immediately dragged Ling Lan and the others to the combat room to watch the fights. Of course, he also intended to go fight a match for himself.

There was an extremely spacious combat room inside the starship. Ling Lan noticed that the walls of the combat room were made of highly resistant metal-composite steel plates. Anything below 1 tonne¹ of strength would not leave a mark on them; this was definitely a room which could let fighters fight as hard as they liked...

Cold sweat beaded on Ling Lan's forehead. It looked like the crew members of this starship were all battle maniacs, otherwise they would not have specially used such an expensive and precious metal just to make a combat room.

By the time Ling Lan and the others got there, in the combat room, there had already been quite a few students who had sparred with the starship's crew members. Although the Class-A children were considered exceptional among the students of the same grade at school, compared to these crewmen, they were really all too green. It only took a few moves for the students to lose; even the one who performed the best was not able to last more than 10 moves.

This kind of one-sided fighting was not at all exciting in the crewmen's eyes, causing the spectating crewmen to yawn non-stop. "The captain must be really bored to

monkey around like this, actually getting us to fool around with these little brats. Just watching Lil' Jin and the others fighting like this is really uncomfortable." As they were afraid to hurt the children by accident, every crewman that went up to fight had to be exceedingly careful with their strength. These people observing were depressed just watching this.

Being used to battles with real knives and guns, these fights were truly just like child's play to the crewmen. They had no interest at all in playing along, which was why they were rather put out at being forced to do this by their captain's command.

These words drew the indignation of the surrounding Central Scout Academy students. However, after these few rounds of sparring, they too knew that the gap in strength between them and the crewmen was just too large. Even if they rushed forwards, they would just be delivering themselves up for bullying.

The students of Special Class-A had always been a privileged lot in the academy. The academy had instilled the notion in their minds that they were the best of the bunch, so their pride was naturally stronger than the other students by far. Against this sort of terrible defeat, they were of course unwilling to just admit defeat — they wanted to get some dignity back!

"The ones you have beaten aren't even the strongest in our class. Wait till you've defeated those strongest few before saying anything more," said one of the students huffily.

These words were soundly approved by all the students in attendance. "That's right, the strongest person in our class isn't here yet. Don't look down on us."

"Defeat him first before talking big..."

The angry words of the children made the crew members burst out into laughter. One of the crewmen even moved to point at one of the skinnier crew members and said, "Quan, later, why don't you be the one to meet their strongest fighter?"

"Me? But I'm a JMC, combat isn't my specialty," said Quan softly, scratching his head. It was general knowledge that JMCs were the crew members with the weakest combat ability on board the starship.

"That's why you're perfect! At least then we'll be able to see them hold out for about 50 moves, giving them some face ²." These crewmen were all old shipmates who

followed no restrictions or taboos — their unfiltered words were definitely not polite, immediately causing many of the scout academy students to almost combust from anger.

Ling Lan had just been quietly watching the proceedings, when suddenly, a voice rang out by her ear, "Even now, you're still holding back?"

It turned out that Wu Jiong and his team had arrived, just in time to hear these words. Right now, veins were popping out on his forehead, and his eyes were lit with the flames of rage — it looked like he was pretty angry.

"You could go up and give it a try," suggested Ling Lan. She was not so impulsive that she would rush forward just because of some words. It's not like being insulted would cause any additional hairs on her head to fall off.

Wu Jiong said darkly, "Aren't you the one who's the strongest of us all?" Ling Lan could tolerate to this extent? Didn't he have any pride of being strong at all? Wu Jiong just could not figure it out.

"If they could be defeated by someone who's not the strongest, wouldn't that be even more exciting?" said Ling Lan lightly with a quirk of a brow.

Wu Jiong cast a searching look at Ling Lan, and then a mocking smile appeared on his lips. "True!" That said, he readied himself to move forward when a hand suddenly reached for him.

Wu Jiong reflexively tried to dodge, but found that he had no chance — that hand had sealed off all the room he had to dodge...

"It's not yet time for you to go out." Ling Lan was the one who had stopped Wu Jiong.

"Lin Zhong-qing," Ling Lan suddenly turned to yell out.

Startled, Lin Zhong-qing blinked for a moment before replying in a hurry, "Boss, what's up?"

"You go and test that person," ordered Ling Lan. "Use only the scout academy's foundational combat arts."

"Alright..." Although Lin Zhong-qing did not know why Ling Lan refused to let him use

any secret arts, since the Boss had said so, he would follow through even though he did not understand.

"To fight with our strongest top-rank, a JMC is unqualified." Lin Zhong-qing's voice cut through the crowd, causing the Class-A students to cheer after they got over their surprise. They had seen that Ling Lan, Qi Long, Wu Jiong and the others of their team had all come. Moreover, Lin Zhong-qing was part of Ling Lan's team. His coming forward must have undoubtedly been approved by Ling Lan.

Wu Jiong watched as Lin Zhong-qing walked onto the combat area, and asked Ling Lan worriedly, "Will he be fine?"

"Facing a JMC who isn't specialised in combat, as long as Lin Zhong-qing keeps his head, he won't lose." Ling Lan could tell at a glance that that crewman Quan was not a real combat expert. Although Lin Zhong-qing's skills and techniques were very common, his foundational combat arts were very solid. Against this kind of person with weak combat basics, he shouldn't have much difficulty.

"I'll take your word for it." Wu Jiong had faith in Ling Lan's judgement. After all, in terms of combat, within their class, if Ling Lan claimed to be second place, then no one would dare to claim first place.

"Oh oh oh... Go, Quan, go!" The crew of the starship began to make a ruckus.

Under the egging of his companions, Quan finally walked onto the combat area. In his mind, he thought that even though he couldn't beat his comrades-in-arms, dealing with these bunch of brats would still be no problem.

Chapter 134

Top 5 of the Class

The two of them bowed to each other, and then the fight started. After several moves had been exchanged, the initially loud voices of the crewmen became softer and softer, until their attention was fully absorbed by the fight.

"That rotten brat's basic combat arts are pretty good, very solid."

"He's also quite calm and careful, not using any so-called secret techniques or ultimate moves to break up the integrity of his basic combat arts. Quan just can't find any openings."

"Quan's attacks have all been resolved." The offence and defence of the basic combat arts were very balanced, so unless the opponent was someone whose combat realm greatly exceeded Lin Zhong-qing's, it would otherwise be very difficult for them to crack these basic physical skills built through solid training.

"Your student... this counterattack is perfect, eh? Hmph, these little bastards will now have to tuck away their proud peacock tails." In the captain's room, Old Lian was staring intently at the screen. Seeing his own crew performing so disgracefully, he was extremely angry.

Old Lian had naturally seen the interaction between Ling Lan and Wu Jiong, and was very satisfied at their fighting spirit. However, when he saw Ling Lan send Lin Zhong-qing out to fight, knowing that Lin Zhong-qing was not part of the top tier of Class-A, he had begun to wonder whether that little fellow was being overly confident.

Although that Quan was indeed the JMC of his ship, and his skills were the bottom of the heap among his crew... But still, any member of his crew was no ordinary crew member! Every single one of them had been baptised in the flames of countless merciless battles, all of them seasoned warriors who had clambered up from beneath a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood...

Old Lian believed that even the weakest among them, Quan, should be an impossible opponent to defeat for the students from Class-A. Unexpectedly, he was being harshly slapped in the face by the reality before him...

Sitting at one side, Cheng Yuanhang pretended not to see Old Lian's complexion which was rapidly changing colours. Instead, he calmly took a sip of the tea he held in his hands without saying a word. However, the subtle smile on the corner of his lips showed how pleased he was at the moment.

"Lin Zhong-qing, fighting!" "Lin Zhong-qing, go, go!"

The students of Class-A were all pumped up, cheering enthusiastically for their fighting classmate. Even Li Yingjie, who had never gotten along with Lin Zhong-qing, also kept a stern face throughout, hoping that Lin Zhong-qing would put up a good fight and take back some face for Class-A.

Right then, Quan was beginning to feel somewhat anxious for being unable to take his opponent down; a very small opening appeared in his thus far steady combat arts...

Is this a chance or a trap? Lin Zhong-qing's mind jolted, at this moment, he felt as if he could hear Ling Lan bark out by his ear, "Attack his right flank!" That spot was precisely where the opening was.

Lin Zhong-qing had no time to think — his body just obeyed that command, sending out a powerful punch with all the strength it possessed.

"Bam!" The sound of a fist meeting flesh. This move of Lin Zhong-qing's came swiftly — the opponent was flustered, and unable to dodge, he was hit directly!

Quan was seen staggering several steps back. Subconsciously, his right hand was pressed onto his right flank. His face was white as a sheet, and there was a pained expression on his face. It looked like Lin Zhong-qing's punch had landed soundly, and he had taken the full brunt of it.

Expression changing, a crew member with a red cross stitched on the right arm of his uniform jumped out from the crowd. Lifting the emergency healing apparatus on his waist, he quickly scanned the other's body and then said anxiously, "There's internal bleeding. Quick, send Quan into the recovery pod." This guy should be the ship's

doctor.

The ship's doctor's words spurred several muscled crew members into action; they hurriedly carried Quan to the recovery pods. The initially flippant crewmen's expressions had turned serious. They found that this group of little brats before them were not as simple as they had thought.

The combat room lapsed into a short silence. Seeing that the starship's crew were finally taking them seriously, Ling Lan sent a pointed look at Lin Zhong-qing.

Lin Zhong-qing received Ling Lan's cue, and spoke up once more, "I'm not fully proficient in combat arts yet. If I injured that big brother, please forgive me!"

"However, if all the crew members on this grand ship are all of this level, then there would be no need to continue the spars any further." Lin Zhong-qing's words caused the crewmen's faces to pale and flush erratically — this was obviously a comeback targeted at their previous cocky remarks!

"So what you're saying is, the other students in your class are even stronger than you?" An icy voice rang out from behind the crew.

The crew anxiously moved aside to give way, all of them calling out, "Sir¹!"

Ling Lan's eyes narrowed. A man dressed in Federation military uniform appeared, his entire demeanour emitting a piercing cold air. He looked to be around 35 to 36 years old, one of the youngest among the crewmen, but the other much older crewmen all seemed to treat him with extreme respect, perhaps even some fear.

From the pressure exerted by the other, Ling Lan could just tell that this person was probably the strongest one among all these crew members.

The other's aura also affected Lin Zhong-qing. Lin Zhong-qing felt as if he was being pressed down by an invisible force, so heavy that his knees wanted to buckle, but the pride in his bones would not allow him to disgrace the academy, disgrace his class, and disgrace Ling Lan's team. A flash of white teeth, and he borrowed the pain from biting his own cheek to recover the prideful look on his face. Then, he replied, "With my strength, I can only squeeze into the top 10. As for the top 5, I don't even have the right to touch them with a finger..."

"Is that so? Now I really want to see how strong this top 5 of your class whom you can't

even touch really are." The military instructor cast his gaze over the surrounding crewmen, searching. This made the crew members stand up straight reflexively and throw out their chests.

"Team Golden Scales." The instructor's gaze finally landed on one of the teams. "This time, your team is up!"

"Yes, Sir!" The six men of Team Golden Scales could not conceal their surprise; they had not expected the instructor to send them out.

This nomination also flabbergasted the other crew members. They would never have expected the instructor to go so far, actually sending out the team members of their ace mecha team. Were these little brats really that strong?

"Can you call out your class's top 5 now?" After arranging the roster for the starship's crew, the instructor turned his head to ask Lin Zhong-qing, tone indifferent.

Lin Zhong-qing reflexively turned to look at Ling Lan. One of the fingers of Ling Lan's low-hanging right hand gave a light flick.

Standing beside Ling Lan, Han Jijyun suddenly felt himself being pushed out gently by a surge of energy. His body took two strides forward involuntarily, coming to stand in front of Ling Lan and the others. It was as if he had seen Lin Zhong-qing's question, and stepped out by himself to explain.

Han Jijyun was a smart child; he instantly understood who the one who had pushed him forward was. Steadying himself, he immediately introduced the top 5 of their class to the instructor: Qi Long, Wu Jiong, Li Yingjie, Luo Lang, and Ling Lan.

Wu Jiong looked at Lin Zhong-qing and Han Jijyun standing in front of them, and quietly asked Ling Lan, "How shall we arrange this?"

"To win, or purely for sparring?" Ling Lan threw back this question.

"What do you mean?" Wu Jiong frowned.

"If we want to win, then we should follow the methods of Tian Ji's horse-racing²; if we just want to spar to learn something, then it's best to have roughly equal matchups." It was now up to Wu Jiong and the others to choose. Ling Lan was frankly unconcerned whether they won or lost — her gaze met that of the instructor's. She

had no interest in the Golden Scales Team. It would probably be more meaningful if she could fight against that instructor.

Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie discussed the matter for a moment, then decided that they wanted to win. Having a strong thirst for victory, they were unwilling to accept defeat.

Qi Long and Luo Lang did not have an opinion; they were willing to just follow whatever Ling Lan decided.

Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie's choice made Ling Lan's brows furrow gently. This fear of losing a fight was not a good thing. Still, Ling Lan did not say anything, only nodding to show that she understood. There was a total of six members in the Golden Scales Team. With a glance, Ling Lan could already tell which few were weaker and which few were stronger. Her eyes flickered in thought, and then she called Qi Long to call Han Jijyun back for a discussion.

In the end, the few of them decided to request for the scout academy to have the right to freely choose their opponent. After all, they were the weaker side — it was very normal for them to have some conditions.

Han Jijyun conveyed Ling Lan and the others' request to the instructor, and he agreed to it without any hesitation.

Li Yingjie was the first to go up. The opponent Ling Lan selected for him was the weakest one among the Golden Scales Team. The instructor's brows lifted slightly, watching Li Yingjie's fight intently even in his surprise. As expected, Li Yingjie's ability wasn't bad, actually able to fight on even ground with that crew member, not at all disadvantaged.

"The principles of Tian Ji horse-racing, is it? Interesting." A hint of a smile appeared on the instructor's lips. These kids really had a strong desire for victory, it seemed. Still, this wasn't a bad thing — if they didn't have these kinds of intense feelings, then they wouldn't be passionate youths, would they?

Li Yingjie's basic combat arts were obviously weaker than Lin Zhong-qing's, and the opponent was someone N-times stronger than Lin Zhong-qing's opponent. Several times, he was almost defeated because the opponent had caught hold of the openings in his movements. Fortunately, Li Yingjie's inherited family martial arts and secret techniques were all high-grade material. Every time he felt that something was not

right, he would use a Li family life-saving technique. This helped him to avoid many sure-hit attacks.

Just like that, the two fighters exchanged over a hundred moves. The member of the Golden Scales Team felt that this was a great loss of face, being unable to take down such a small brat like this... He lifted his head to look at the instructor, a plea in his eyes.

The instructor's brows were locked deeply, and he shook his head without even having to think about it. Of course he knew what the other was asking for, but that movement was the last resort of mecha. Moreover, beating a mere student with that would be meaningless.

Unable to get approval from the instructor, the team member seemed to lose all fighting spirit. Li Yingjie grasped an opening he revealed in his negligence and sent the other stumbling back three steps.

Catching his balance, the team member was enraged. To reclaim his lost face, the stance of his two hands shifted abruptly, his five fingers clenched lightly as he faced Li Yingjie from a distance.

The instructor's countenance changed, and he yelled, "Stop!" The team member was jerked back to awareness by this loud yell. Cold sweat poured from his forehead, and he immediately pulled back his hands to stand to one side.

"This match, we forfeit," said the instructor coldly, "L19, return immediately and go into isolation for 3 days."

"Yes!" L19 replied, head bowed. Due to the height difference, Ling Lan could see the complicated expression on his face, which also held a trace of thankfulness.

Chapter 135

As the Fights Progress!

L19 very quickly left the combat room — it looked like he was going to shut himself up in isolation immediately. Ling Lan saw that no one accompanied him, looks like the discipline of the crew was extremely strict and clear-cut. This was not something any ordinary contracted starship could do.

A trace of understanding appeared on the curve of Ling Lan's lips; she pretty much knew what kind of existence this starship was now.

Their initial plan was for Luo Lang to be the second to fight, but after some calculation, Ling Lan decided to switch the positions and let Wu Jiong fight first. Of course, Ling Lan also told Wu Jiong who the second weakest opponent in the line-up was.

With regards to the change in fighting order, though Wu Jiong was a little confused, he did not have any objections. Before he entered the combat area, Ling Lan said lowly, "Hold up first for about ten moves, wait till the opponent's charge wanes before fighting back."

Li Yingjie's victory had been very random, and could be considered a concession by the other side. But nevertheless, it was still a loss for their opponents. This would naturally stoke the indignation of the remaining members and cause them to yearn even more for victory — they desperately needed a victory to reclaim their face.

Ling Lan speculated that this time, the opponent would no longer give them the opportunity to initiate attack. The opponent would most certainly attack fiercely so that they could take this match cleanly and quickly. If the students could not hold up against this starting wave of attacks, then there would be no shot at victory.

Thus, Luo Lang, who wasn't good at handling this sort of berserk attack mode, was not suitable to come out now. It was likely that he would become flustered just after a few moves from the opponent, and would quickly be defeated and sent off the field. Ling Lan was unconcerned with the outcome of this sparring competition, but she also did not want Luo Lang to just lose without learning anything. Therefore, she needed to first crack this rush attack strategy of the opponents, to make them believe that

snatching the attack initiative was useless.

But Wu Jiong was different — he specialised in handling this kind of rush attack. Ling Lan believed that he would definitely be able to withstand the initial rush, and this was why Ling Lan wanted him to fight second. Wu Jiong wanted to win, while Ling Lan did not want her followers to learn nothing from the experience; this way would cover both bases.

Of course, in order to make sure Wu Jiong would be able to win the match, Ling Lan still gave Wu Jiong a reminder, making sure he was prepared.

Wu Jiong nodded to indicate that he understood. Although the two of them were considered competing rivals within the class, this did not mean that he didn't trust Ling Lan's judgement.

The two fighters got into position and bowed to one another. Wu Jiong's opponent was a big man of about 30 years of age. One look at the other's hulking body and the thick strong muscles on his arms, and it was obvious that the opponent was definitely a power-type fighter. Wu Jiong mentally raised his guard, Ling Lan's reminder resurfacing in his mind. At first, he had been planning to observe a bit more, but he now immediately made the decision to defend first before attacking.

Sure enough, as Ling Lan predicted, the opponent this time was no longer as careless and casual as the opponent who had fought Li Yingjie. The other was approaching this fight very seriously, with no thought of giving a handicap. The moment the fight began, he charged forwards like a thunderstorm, bringing forth a flurry of punches and kicks, each movement fierce and powerful.

Because Wu Jiong was mentally prepared, this ferocious whirlwind attack mode did not faze him much. He kept calm and dodged each attack carefully. He was like a leaf floating on the surface of a raging sea, riding the waves without fear — no matter how fierce the other's attacks were, he could always find some way to hold on without losing any ground.

He weathered a round of the other's attacks with much difficulty, and then — perhaps the other had pushed himself too far in order to keep the momentum of his attacks going, for the force behind them suddenly slowed obviously — Wu Jiong, who had long been ready to counterattack, leapt forward without having to think twice. A set of advanced military-use combat arts belonging to the Wu family was unleashed from

his hands, and he stole the attack initiative from his opponent. This sudden change caused the team member of the Golden Scales to scramble to switch gears, and the course of the battle turned.

Seeing this, the instructor's brows furrowed lightly. He was now almost certain that the other side was using the strategy of Tian Ji's horse-racing — who'd have guessed that they would be able to accurately pick out the two weakest members of Team Golden Scales? Furthermore, the student who had fought in the first match as well as the one fighting now was most likely part of the top 3 of the 5-student line-up.

The instructor had yet to finish this line of thinking when the scene on the field changed. Charging in close, Wu Jiong struck both of his fists out at the same time — this short and swift attack was too fast for the opponent's defence, and he was hit full on by Wu Jiong's attack.

Wu Jiong's attack this time used two One-Inch Punches, so though it looked like two light hits, it really wasn't. The opponent was obviously misled, and the force of the One-Inch Punches caused him to stumble back quite a few steps.

Gaining an advantage, Wu Jiong did not show any mercy. He stayed close to the opponent and his fists pummelled the other's abdomen in a frenzied rain of attacks. (This was a height issue; Wu Jiong could only attack that spot.) The opponent had no choice but to move to block these attacks — the abdomen was one of the weakest spots on the human body. Though Wu Jiong's frame was small, his strength was not insignificant, so the opponent had to be careful. He could only keep retreating to dispel the force of Wu Jiong's attacks.

Then, suddenly, Wu Jiong's frenzied attacks stopped. He pulled back his strength and leapt backwards to return to his starting position, putting some distance between him and his opponent. He then bowed to the other and said, "Thank you for the concession, Uncle!"

The man abruptly realised — he looked down at his feet, and sure enough, without knowing it, he had retreated till he had stepped out of the defined boundaries of the combat area. In other words, he had been forced out of the ring by Wu Jiong; according to the rules, he had indeed lost the match.

The man could not help but chuckle wryly. "What an impressive scout, it is truly my loss."

The man then marched over to stand in front of the instructor, lowered his head and said, "I'm sorry, Sir, I've lost."

"L18, return and enter isolation for three days!" The instructor sighed softly and assigned punishment again. Losing to a scout was an embarrassment for an adult — by giving out some punishment, it may help to ease the shame.

The man saluted the instructor gratefully, and then turned to leave. It looked like he was also going off on his own to isolate himself immediately. Isolation was not necessarily a bad thing — sometimes, cooling off for a bit may perhaps reap great benefits. Many people had earned their advancements and improved their abilities through isolating themselves and reflecting.

Still, after two consecutive men going off to isolate themselves without objection, Ling Lan's line-up of five shared a knowing glance. There was only one message in their eyes — this starship was most likely a military vessel in active service that was currently disguised as a mercenary vessel. Consequently, the planet they were headed to this time was most likely not the publicly known primitive planet as stated in their communicator notifications, but instead a secret planet sealed by the military.

After gaining two victories, the scout academy students were on cloud nine and were getting a little carried away — they actually began shouting out to win all the following matches. In contrast, there were still some students who kept their head, who felt that the following matches would not be as simple anymore.

In particular, Qi Long and Luo Lang's expressions were currently extremely grim. This was because their boss had told them personally that he had already chosen the strongest two fighters from the Golden Scales Team for them. In Ling Lan's words, they were being served up to be tormented.

Luo Lang was the third to go up. The opponent he chose was a young man of about 22 to 23 years of age. He had a refined look about him with a bashful smile on his face, making others feel as if he was very harmless.

However, Ling Lan told Luo Lang with absolute certainty that this man was not as harmless as he seemed. He was the second strongest among the six people of the Golden Scales Team, and was a vicious character who wasn't beneath using underhanded tactics to win. As Ling Lan was saying this, his face clearly expressed a hint of pity, as if declaring that Luo Lang wouldn't have a good time of it in this fight.

The instructor really thought that the other side would follow the flow of Tian Ji's horse-racing all the way, and so choose their third weakest team member. Unexpectedly, the other chose the second strongest of the Golden Scales Team this time, and it was the one with the belly full of plots and schemes to boot.

The instructor couldn't help but shake his head, thinking to himself that Ling Lan and the others were most likely going to be disappointed this time. This was because this young man... even the instructor himself found him hard to deal with. He just laid too many traps in his fights, setting out too many lures — even he could not help but fall for some of them a few times. That man was truly the most difficult person to handle within the Golden Scales Team...

Could it be that they thought that this team member appeared weaker? The instructor took a closer look at that black-bellied punk of the Golden Scales Team, and found that he really did give off that kind of vibe. Had the children really fallen for this trap? Or did they have some other motive for choosing him?

The instructor's gaze once again honed in on Ling Lan's side, trying to glean some hint from their bodies. When he noticed that these scouts were only as tall as their chests, he was abruptly taken aback, and then he couldn't help but chuckle lowly to himself. Unknowingly, he had begun to consider the students on an even playing field as himself. The other side was clearly just some kids of about 10 years old — how could they figure out who was stronger or weaker in the Golden Scales Team from appearance alone? Perhaps the first two matches they won were just a coincidence...

"Luo Lang, once you go up, don't think too much. Don't worry about whether the other has any openings or not. Just focus on using your basic physical skills properly, and deal with any blows as they come." Not having the heart to see Luo Lang lose terribly, Ling Lan chose to give him a small suggestion.

Luo Lang nodded, and said gratefully, "Got it, Boss." Even knowing he was going out to be tormented, it would still be nice to not lose too badly.

Luo Lang understood deep down that he was definitely no match for his opponent. Although the other did not look that old, he must have already been through countless battles and must have struggled through many life-or-death scenarios. In reality, his battle experience must exceed Luo Lang's by several multiples, being a battle-seasoned veteran soldier. Luo Lang considered it great luck that he would be able to spar with someone like this before going on the hunting assignment.

Perhaps seeing how L18's rush attack was ineffective, combined with Luo Lang's serious face, which had no sign of arrogance from the previous two wins, the opponent chose to give up on the rush attack strategy. He began to circle around Luo Lang, testing him. As he circled, he would intentionally reveal some defence holes, small openings etcetera, trying to entice Luo Lang into attacking first.

However, due to Ling Lan's warning, Luo Lang just ignored all these openings. He too was extremely careful — before figuring out the opponent's true strength, he would not move recklessly.

They faced-off just like this for several circles, and then, as if feeling that it would be useless to continue on like this, the opponent attacked.

The scout academy's basic combat arts, though said to be equally balanced in terms of offence and defence, at its heart, each of its attacks was built on the foundation of defence. In other words, the defensive strength of the scout academy's basic combat arts was extremely solid — it could perhaps even be said to be perfect.

Chapter 136

Ling Lan's Wrath!

Because Luo Lang took Ling Lan's warning to heart, no matter how the opponent tried to rush him, lure him, mislead him, or pull him in with faked openings, he remained steady. He resolutely ignored all temptation, using only the basic combat arts he was well-versed in to counter each move the opponent made. He held fast to defence, and never launched any attacks of his own.

However, this situation was soon broken. When Luo Lang was faced with the exact same opening for the n-th time, his heart wavered. He began considering whether this opening was a true opening or not... Luo Lang could not be blamed for wavering, because this opening was somewhat different than the other openings he had seen previously. Many times before, he had almost missed it completely; it was that well-concealed.

In contrast to the other openings which had disappeared after he ignored them once or twice, this opening had appeared again and again countless times despite his ignoring it. And whenever it appeared, it would be extremely subtle and easy to miss... but regardless of how insignificant it was, an opening was an opening — it had still been noticed by Luo Lang.

Of course, Luo Lang did not choose to attack impulsively straightaway; instead, he carefully observed to try and find the reason why that opening would appear. He had not forgotten Boss Ling Lan's words, so he decided to watch for a bit longer. The moment he confirmed that this was a true opening, he definitely would not go easy on his opponent...

Luo Lang carefully observed the opponent's movements and assessed the strength behind the other's blows as he blocked them. Finally, he gained some insight.

The opponent was left-handed! So his left hand could exert much more strength than his right hand. Yet, everyone knew that combat arts typically favoured right-handed attacks, while the left hand was mostly used for blocking techniques. Perhaps for this reason, the opponent had modified the combat arts he had learned into right-handed blocks and left-handed attacks. Of course, this modification had its pros and cons —

the advantage was that it was easier for right-handed opponents to mess up their blocks and face his attack directly, and the disadvantage was similar, in that he may also end up making an error in defense.

To resolve this problem, the opponent had come up with a plan. He was a smart man, and did not want something he modified to be unusable, so he chose an extremely challenging route of development. He made it so that he would be able to shift between blocking and attacking seamlessly — in other words, both his left and right hand could be used to attack and defend. If he became proficient in this, although it could not be said that he would be unrivalled, fighters on the same level would find this move of his extremely hard to crack.

But fortunately, it seemed like the opponent still had not merged his set of moves completely. Because of this, there was a momentary lapse whenever he shifted between offence and defence, and this gap would be the best moment for Luo Lang to attack.

After coming to this conclusion, to avoid any accidents, Luo Lang continued to exchange several more moves with the opponent to confirm. Finding everything as he expected, he decided not to wait any longer and attacked. Since this was an opportunity, he definitely would not miss it.

When Luo Lang moved to strike at the opponent's opening during that lapse, the observing Ling Lan sighed in her heart. This opening was really just too perfect — Luo Lang still was not able to resist its temptation in the end. It was a trap!

Sure enough, as Luo Lang threw his punch at what was obviously a flaw, the flaw suddenly disappeared. It was as if that weak point was just something he had imagined, having never existed to begin with.

Luo Lang only felt his attacking right arm be grabbed by a powerful large hand, and then he was dragged forward by the other before he could pull back.

Luo Lang found himself falling forwards as he lost his balance, and at the same time, he felt a heavy strike to his abdomen. And then, he was flying backwards, a mouthful of blood spewing from his mouth...

Not only that, in Luo Lang's vision, the opponent had once again raised his fist and was hurtling towards him to attack.

At that moment, Luo Lang's heart was filled with helplessness and regret — he had not held fast to Boss's warning, and fell for the opponent's trap. The result would be a tragic one; it looked like the other was going to give him a good beating now. His only hope was that he wouldn't be too badly injured — he still had to attend the hunting course after all.

Right then, a figure suddenly appeared in the combat area, catching the opponent's follow-up punch in one hand.

Ice in her tone, Ling Lan said, "This match, we admit defeat! However..." Blood-red killing intent surged from her body. Only for an instant, but it was enough to send chills down the backs of everyone present.

Ling Lan's gaze shot like cold lasers into the opponent's eyes, and cold fear rose in his heart. "This follow-up fist, I'll be taking it!"

That said, Ling Lan's right hand, which was gripping the other's wrist, twisted, and with a crisp "crack!", the other's hand was cleanly broken.

"Stop!" A cry rang out at the same time as the sound of this break, and then, fuming, the instructor could only say, "You go too far."

Ling Lan looked at him coldly, and said, "Too far? That last attack had already caused serious damage to my companion. And this additional punch wasn't going too far?"

The instructor flushed to his ears. "How would you know if that extra punch of his would further injure your companion? The Golden Scales Team have absolute control over the level of their strength."

"Absolute control? What great absolute control..." Ling Lan let loose a few dry laughs.

Yes, indeed, Ling Lan was thoroughly enraged. Luo Lang had already been injured by the opponent, but the other still chose to follow through with another punch — this obviously had some malicious intent behind it. And when Ling Lan stopped the attack by gripping the other's wrist, she could sense the power behind the attack. Although it would not kill Luo Lang, it was certainly enough to force Luo Lang to stay in a recovery pod for 3 to 5 months. In that case, Luo Lang would have no choice but to be absent for the hunting course this time. Mind you, the first hunting course was extremely important, and may even affect the distribution of cultivation resources — these were all things Luo Lang could not afford to miss.

And this was also one of the reasons why Ling Lan could not forgive the opponent. Therefore, in her wrath, she had broken the other's wrist in warning.

Ling Lan's connotation-laden words and her mocking laughter put the instructor in an awkward position. Although this soldier under him was both talented and strong, he was rather petty — the two consecutive losses for their team irked him, making him feel that they, the Golden Scales, had lost face. So, even when he had won, he had not stopped, wanting to teach these scout brats a good lesson, but he unexpectedly kicked a steel plate instead.

"L15, after your injuries are healed, go into isolation for three days as well. Reflect on your actions!" Extremely embarrassed, the instructor bellowed at L15.

Although L15's wrist had been broken by Ling Lan, his expression remained calm, as if it was not his wrist that had been broken. Only the thin trails of sweat running from his forehead proved that he was actually holding back the pain. Upon hearing the instructor's verdict, he used his other working hand to salute and responded, "Yes, Sir!"

As he left, he swept a dark look at Ling Lan who was still standing in the combat area. A trace of lethal animosity flashed through his eyes, but it only lasted for an instant. He swiftly returned to normal, as if that dark emotion had just been a hallucination.

"Boss, he actually dares to think of harming you? I'll destroy him!" Catching sight of this, Little Four was sent jumping in anger. He pulled up his sleeves in preparation to go fight for his boss.

Ling Lan huffed exasperatedly, *"You want to destroy him? How?"*

Little Four abruptly realised that he had no real hands and feet, and so had no way of helping his boss to destroy that fellow. He was so shocked that he went off to crouch in a corner to draw circles in gloomy silence.

But he quickly recovered when inspiration flashed through his mind. He jumped up and said to his boss excitedly, *"Boss, quickly go and get a mecha of your own in real life! Then I'll be able to help you!"* He could totally replace the mecha's A.I. and command the mecha to go PK¹ that fellow...

Ling Lan could not bear to see Little Four disappointed, so she nodded and said, *"Okay, I'll hurry, and then you can help me to handle those bad eggs that want to harm me."*

Only with this was Little Four pacified.

No one noticed the cold and sinister look L15 directed at Ling Lan; everyone was filled with admiration for L15's stoicism under such intense pain. Of course, most of the attention was on Ling Lan standing in the middle, and those gazes were filled with shock and disbelief.

On the other hand, the scout academy students all had a matter-of-fact look on their faces, proving that Ling Lan's ability was indeed typically at this level. This made the crew members no longer dare to look down on the students.

By this time, the instructor had regained his composure. He looked at Ling Lan and said coldly, "You should be the strongest one among them, right? Judging by your strength, none of the Golden Scales team members will be a match for you. There's no need for the remaining matches then." He looked at strongest member of the Golden Scales Team — the team leader, a 25 to 26 year old stern-faced youth — and his face revealed a trace of regret. Since the other had managed to break L15's wrist in one move, then L13 would most likely be unable to hold out for more than a few moves.

"Of course the matches should continue. The one to fight next isn't me. It'll be the other top 5 candidate from our class, Qi Long!" declared Ling Lan loudly.

Qi Long rushed forward to stand by her side. "Boss, I'm here."

Ling Lan patted Qi Long's shoulder, and then turned to say earnestly to the team leader of the Golden Scales, "Big Brother, please guide this companion of mine well."

The team leader looked to the instructor for instruction, and the instructor nodded helplessly. Since they had already agreed to this sparring competition from the start, he couldn't very well refuse now, could he?

In the captain's room, Cheng Yuanhang, whose expression had changed slightly when Luo Lang was injured, saw Ling Lan's forceful retaliation and promptly returned to normal. In contrast, Old Lian's face was dark and grim, feeling that he had greatly lost face from this. Who would have guessed that the young man he had placed so much hope on would turn out to be such a sore loser?

"Old Lian, that one must be a top talent among your ranks here, right? It's normal for

him to be a little arrogant," counselled Cheng Yuanhang kindly.

"Hmph! Compared to your class's Ling Lan, he's just a pile of crap," huffed Old Lian. His heart was itching — if he could get this unparalleled genius for his ship, then he would have hit a jackpot.

"I've already said not to even think about it. The First Division Special Ops Team already have their eyes on him." Cheng Yuanhang told this information to the other bluntly, in hopes that the other would not waste his time and back off. Some talents... could really only be appreciated from afar and not obtained.

Old Lian let out a regretful sigh. This starship of theirs was still too low-level to think of obtaining this kind of peerless prodigy. This was also why L15, despite his pettiness, was still the bearer of their hopes here.

Meanwhile, on the field, Qi Long and the Golden Scales team leader, L13, were already locked together in an intense battle. L13's combat style was also the forthright and supremely aggressive type, very similar to Qi Long's combat style. Early on, Ling Lan had sensed this in their presences, and hence paired them up to fight.

Chapter 137

Qi-Jin Stage?

However, in the end, Qi Long still lost to L13, the team leader of the Golden Scales. Yet, Qi Long wasn't too disappointed. From the very start of the match, he had already known that no matter how talented he was, or how solid his combat foundations were, he wouldn't be able to match up to these battle-seasoned veteran soldiers in terms of combat experience.

Both fighters had honest and hearty dispositions — after clashing in battle, the Golden Scales' team leader had a really good impression of Qi Long. Therefore he extended an invitation to Qi Long — while they were travelling together, as long as he was free, Qi Long could come seek him out for a spar any time.

It had to be said that human relations really depended a lot on chance encounters. Qi Long and L13 were undoubtedly destined to meet; this was a great surprise that pleased Ling Lan.

Ling Lan knew very well that Qi Long's combat arts had reached its first bottleneck stage. To break through it, there were two ways. One of them was to wait for the right timing, for that opportunity of sudden insight — this way, the bottleneck would naturally be resolved on its own. The other method was to increase battle experience by throwing oneself into countless fights, especially against experienced combat experts. In those fights, one could seek inspiration bit by bit to spur a breakthrough.

Of course, these two methods all needed a certain degree of luck. Still, compared to the vagueness and uncertainty of the first option, the success rate of the latter method was clearly higher. Ling Lan naturally hoped that Qi Long could walk the second path to seek his breakthrough.

Unfortunately, although Ling Lan's strength was high among Ling Lan's party, because everything she mastered were ultimate killing moves, she was not a suitable candidate for this sort of energy-draining, drawn out spars in search of inspiration. On the other hand, the others in the group were weaker than Qi Long, and so had no way to place the intense pressure needed on Qi Long to spur his breakthrough.

On this, Ling Lan was extremely helpless. The lack of suitable candidates around had caused Qi Long to stagnate indefinitely at his bottleneck, just waiting for the fluke of sudden insight. As for those combat instructors in the academy, due to the sheer number of students they had to instruct, they just didn't have the time to provide these guidance spars for Qi Long.

Of course, there was still one more good candidate, and that was Qi Long's initiate instructor. The more Qi Long learned, the more he could sense how strong his initiate instructor was. But unfortunately, after mentoring him for over a year, his initiate instructor had become very elusive — they did not even know where to begin looking for him. Thus, they could only patiently wait for the instructors to come to them.

Moreover, Qi Long's bottleneck had only appeared recently, so his initiate instructor would have no idea that his student had already encountered his very first bottleneck.

Ling Lan's mood was exceedingly great! She had not expected to help Qi Long resolve this issue with just one unintended spar on this starship. L13's combat level was clearly higher than Qi Long's, and even more perfect was the fact that his combat style was extremely close to Qi Long's. The success rate for breaking through a bottleneck was undoubtedly higher with the help of an opponent with a similar combat style.

At this moment, Ling Lan's lingering resentment towards L15 was naturally lessened by her good mood. In her mind, she decided that as long as the other did not cross her in future, she would definitely leave him alone.

Just when everyone thought the sparring matches were over, something unexpected happened! Ling Lan actually spoke up to ask the instructor, "Sir, why don't we have a match?"

At these words, the instructor turned to stare intently at Ling Lan, and then said, "It would be my pleasure!" Ling Lan's clean and efficient interception of L15's attack had shaken the instructor, and he was actually a little chilled by the ruthless way Ling Lan had broken L15's wrist. A tendril of fear had even risen in his heart when a little of Ling Lan's bloodlust had leaked.

The instructor knew well that Ling Lan's strength was considerable — perhaps not much weaker than his. Thus, he too wanted to fight a match with Ling Lan personally so that he would be able to properly gauge this child's true strength. The Central Scout Academy was known as the focus grounds for aberrant prodigies... this child, who was

clearly the strongest of this batch of prodigies — how strong was he exactly?

Ling Lan's words made all the students bubble over with excitement. Who would have guessed that Ling Lan would challenge the starship's instructor? Everyone knew that the starship's instructor would certainly be one of the strongest few on the ship.

All the spectators self-consciously went silent, eyes trained on the two in the combat area.

Ling Lan and the instructor faced one another from a distance, each at their respective corners. It was as if the fight hadn't begun yet, but all the spectators knew that wasn't true. This was because the demeanours of both combatants were extremely serious, and there was a vague sense of a formless pressure slowly gathering between them. Even the spectators could feel the pressure pressing down on them mentally, making them back away involuntarily.

Very quickly, the audience in the combat room had stepped back about ten or so metres from the combat area. At that point, only the stronger people on the starship managed to stand their ground; meanwhile, of the academy students, the only ones who could stand in this area were Qi Long and Wu Jiong. Li Yingjie and Luo Lang were one step behind them, while Ye Xu and Lin Zhong-qing were behind Luo Lang and Li Yingjie by a half-step. This, was a reflection of their true strength.

The outermost circle was mostly scout academy students. This made the students grit their teeth, silently determined to train even harder — they definitely could not disgrace their Special Class-A. All of them looked with faces full of hope at Qi Long and the others standing right at the front, and told themselves that one day they would also stand beside them...

As for Ling Lan standing in the ring... uh, that wasn't human anymore — they wouldn't try to match an anomaly.

The forces of Ling Lan and the instructor's presences clashed, both trying to suppress the other. The instructor put in all his strength from the start, but found that Ling Lan was standing there like a mountain buffeted by winds ¹, impossible to budge.

The instructor took a deep breath, and knowing that his strength had accumulated till its highest point, it was time for him to strike...

The spectators were still patiently waiting when suddenly both combatants rushed at

each other at the same time, each throwing a punch.

Both punches did not look that heavy, almost seeming somewhat casual. They did not have any of the flourishes of combat stances, but were merely simple punches. One might say they were fast, but they were not that fast either — all the spectators saw were two fists travelling on the same straight line, getting closer and closer to one another, to finally connect.

A loud "BAM"! What seemed like two very casual punches actually created such a deafening sound upon contact. On top of that, the formless energy caused by the backlash from the crashing of fists pushed the spectators back once more. Qi Long, Wu Jiong, and the others were forced to move back another 3 to 4 steps, a heavy weight on their chests, as if they had been struck.

Wu Jiong and Ye Xu exchanged a shocked and doubtful glance, while Li Yingjie's complexion paled. Qi Long and Luo Lang both remained unperturbed, while Lin Zhong-qing's eyes flashed with a fierce light.

Meanwhile, some of the more average starship crew members had even been sent tumbling by this force. This punch of Ling Lan's shocked all the crewmen, and they completely lost any last bit of disdain they had for the students.

In the captain's room, seeing this scene, Old Lian's expression changed drastically and he choked out, "How can this be, he has actually attained the Qi-Jin stage..."

The development of physical skills was expressed by six major stages — Foundational, Manifestation, Refinement, Qi-Jin ², Domain, and God-Realm. Except for the Foundational and Manifestation stages which had 10 levels, the other 4 stages were a kind of plane. How strong the embodiment of each plane was depended on how well an individual understood the plane.

Meanwhile, the differentiation between the 10 levels of the Foundational and Manifestation stages were in terms of punching power, speed, and reflexes. Once all those attained particular numbers, a bottleneck would form naturally — and if one broke through that bottleneck, one would enter the Refinement stage of physical skills, which was the proof of joining the ranks of the physical skills masters.

So, there was a saying in this world: *Of physical skills, those below Refinement, are all*

mediocre.

Generally, in the scout academies, students below the age of 13 would all be in the ranges of the Foundational physical skills stage, while those above 13 were basically all at Manifestation stage.

Of course, very few talented children might be able to enter the Manifestation stage before 13 years old. Qi Long's talent was truly astounding, to already touch the fringes of the Refinement stage. All he needed was to break through his bottleneck to enter it officially.

Thus, the fact that Ling Lan had managed to enter the Qi-Jin stage at this age caused even the steady and experienced Old Lian to be gobsmacked, his expression filled with disbelief...

In truth, Cheng Yuanhang had also been shocked by Ling Lan's display of strength. He had known that Ling Lan was very strong, but he had never imagined he was *this* strong.

Of course, this was also Ling Lan's fault for not displaying her strength before this. Every time she was matched up against Qi Long or Luo Lang, she would just forfeit and end the match. And then, her previous matches were all one-move events, which did not really allow anyone to figure out her real strength. But today's match finally let him know why Ling Lan refused to fight during regular combat practice. Within the Central Scout Academy, other than those last few aberrants in the upper grades that may be able to put up a fight against him, if Ling Lan fought with any other student, it would definitely just be one-sided bullying.

Shaken from his thoughts by Old Lian's words, Cheng Yuanhang put a confident look on his face and said stubbornly, "Why can't it be? In our Central Scout Academy, prodigies are everywhere."

Old Lian glared at him angrily, "If you have that many prodigies, why don't you send some our way?" The new soldiers dispatched to them every time were all the extremely mediocre type.

Cheng Yuanhang shrugged and said helplessly, "You know as well that I'm just responsible for cultivating them. The ones in charge of dispatching them are your upper ranks of the military... Besides, those crazily talented prodigies would first be

taken away by the military schools... and once they come out from there, they're all junior officers. Can your starship hold them?" In the end, Old Lian's starship was really too low in level...

At these words, Old Lian sighed heavily. Indeed, covert teams like theirs which existed in the grey areas... really didn't have any way to possess those prodigies with their endlessly bright futures before them.

In the combat area, Ling Lan could sense from where their fists met that the opponent's strength was waning, and knew that the other was at the end of his rope. A thought flashed through her mind, and she started to pull back her strength, matching the other's as it decreased. In the end, the two of them were pushed back by the rebound of their respective strengths, falling a few steps back.

The two of them separated once more, and once again faced one another from a distance of several metres, as if waiting for the next move to begin.

Unexpectedly, the instructor actually closed his eyes, as if reflecting on the feelings he had received from the previous move. But very quickly, he opened his eyes again, and holding back his emotions, he said, "What is your name?"

"Ling Lan!" Although Ling Lan's expression was blank, perpetuating her image of a slackface, her brows could be seen to lift slightly, showing that she was in a great mood.

"Thank you, I'll remember this kindness. Also, this match is my loss," said the instructor loudly, and he nodded to Ling Lan. Winning or losing wasn't the point here — the main point was that he had learned something from this encounter.

Chapter 138

The Mysterious Planet!

Ling Lan gave an exemplary scout's salute and then turned to walk back to rejoin the other students. To their confused faces, she said, "The spars are over. Let's go back."

The Class-A students glanced at one another, uncertain whether Ling Lan had won or lost this match. Although the starship's instructor had said it was his loss, it wasn't obvious at all from the scene before them. Furthermore, Ling Lan also wasn't displaying any signs of happiness or excitement. Could it be that this was just the instructor being modest to leave some face for the students?

"What are you thinking? We still have far to go. We need to work hard once we get back." Ling Lan's words enlightened the Class-A students — looks like the opponent had really left some face for them.

Under Ling Lan's lead, the Class-A scouts gradually trickled out of the combat room, while the crew members began to gather around the instructor.

Some of the stronger crew members still had shocked expressions on their faces, still unable to believe that a child was able to match up to their instructor in terms of strength. Of course, there were also some weaker crew members who were indignant, and they broke the cold atmosphere to ask, "Sir, why didn't you teach the other a proper lesson? Why still give him face? He injured our L15!"

"Give face? Yes, face was given... but it was he who gave me face." The instructor's expression was dark, and he laughed coldly and said, "What a bunch of blind idiots. All of you — go into isolation for a day!" Even though he did not mind losing, it still did not feel great to have it constantly brought up by others.

The instructor's punishment caused all the present crew members to wail in misery. In particular, those crewmen who had not said anything at all felt like they had been caught in the backlash for no good reason — they could only send fierce dagger-glares at those few idiots who had spoken, but did not dare to object. This was because they understood the instructor well; he was a man that meant exactly what he said. If anyone dared to beg for mercy, the punishment would just be doubled.

The crew members automatically headed towards the designated isolation rooms of the starship. Seeing the instructor following closely behind them, one of the crew members said fawningly, "Sir, you don't have to monitor us. We will go to the isolation rooms on our own."

"I'm not monitoring you all. Rather, I'm also going into isolation for seven days," replied the instructor coldly.

"Whatever for?" exclaimed the crewman, shocked.

"If one does something wrong, one must accept the punishment. The same goes for myself." Leaving this statement behind, the instructor entered an isolation room. The crew members looked at one another in confusion, unsure what exactly the instructor had done wrong...

When the instructor reappeared once more, the calm indifference on his face let everyone know that the instructor's strength had increased again. The initially exposed sharp edges of his power had now been sheathed, becoming almost undetectable. If he did not move to attack, it would be very easy to overlook his existence.

That's right, after isolating himself for seven days, the instructor finally progressed from the middle stage of Qi-Jin to the late stage of Qi-Jin. As for whether he would be able to enter the peak stage of Qi-Jin, or even complete the entire Qi-Jin stage, well, that depended on fate and chance, on whether there was the possibility of obtaining sudden insight.

Old Lian had once asked the instructor how he had attained a breakthrough this time. It should be known that after entering the Refinement stage, every increase in ability required a certain degree of chance and lucky coincidence. The instructor replied that this was due to that sparring match between him and Ling Lan. The force of the other's presence had let his initially stabilized plane to once again sense the possibility of a breakthrough. This was an opportunity for him, and luckily, he caught it.

There was one thing the instructor did not say, however, and that was that he suspected that, in this fight, Ling Lan had given him this helpful push on purpose. If that were true, Ling Lan's strength was very likely already at the later stages of Qi-Jin.

The instructor did not dare to dwell on the idea, otherwise he would start to think that them adults were all idiotic, actually unable to match up to a 10 year old child. Thus, he buried this notion deep within his inner mind.

Still, regardless of whether Ling Lan had done it on purpose or if it was an accident, he would inscribe this kind favour onto his heart.

The sparring matches this time broke the ice between the scouts and the crew of the starship. At times, when either party had some grievance to air, they might argue verbally, and if one side found themselves losing and wanted to settle the matter with a fist fight, naturally no one would object. In this manner, by and by, the relationship between the two sides actually got better and better. Among the crew, aside from the small few who were especially petty, the majority of the men now viewed the scouts with affection and care.

Qi Long, in particular, often sought out the team leader of the Golden Scales Team, L13, for a fight. Every one of their fights was loud and vigorous — at first, some of the crew and the scouts would still cheer for their own companion, but they soon learned to ignore them. This was because these two people were the type to seek torment in their fights. They were never concerned with winning or losing, but only wanted to fight till their muscles were sore and their strength was depleted, only crawling out of the combat room with difficulty after their bodies were covered in bruises and other injuries.

Both sides quickly got used to the self-tormenting fighting style of the two, and so in the end, no one was interested in cheering them on anymore.

Still, self-destructive though the two may be, the effects of their fights were pretty good. Ling Lan could clearly sense that Qi Long's combat ability was gaining more and more of the presence of the Refinement stage — his breakthrough was within reach, all that was needed now was a catalyst.

Meanwhile, the time L13 spent sparring with Qi Long wasn't just fruitless work on his end — in contrast to Qi Long who was still looking for a catalyst to break through, L13, who had just entered the Refinement stage, used these spars to settle fully into the plane of Refinement, no longer stuck in a 'fake' Refinement stage as he had been before the spars.

Ling Lan naturally knew that there was one person on the starship who hated her deeply, and that was the one who had had his wrist broken by her, L15. Ling Lan was a cautious person, so she made Little Four monitor the other around-the-clock. Through this, Little Four unexpectedly found that L15 did not really trust L13 very much. When he found out that L13's strength had increased, the flashes of envy-jealousy-hate in his eyes when no one was looking revealed his true feelings. Although these flashes were mostly just present for an instant — L15 quickly reverting to his default bashful and harmless appearance, face filled with well-wishes — how could they escape the being known as Little Four? An ultimate cheating device capable of comprehensive 360 degrees monitoring with no blind spots — no one would be able to evade his eyes unless Little Four himself chose to neglect this person.

When Little Four told Ling Lan about his discovery, Ling Lan sighed deeply once more. As expected, those who liked to smile were all nothing good — their bellies full of 'bad water'¹, they were truly detestable. This further cemented Ling Lan's distrust of those who smiled all the time, those who were courteous in all respects with great popularity, who gave others an impression of being a good guy. Ling Lan felt that these types of people were definitely hiding something behind their smiles, so she needed to be extremely careful when dealing with them.

In this way, a week of raucous bickering and fighting passed. Although L15's heart still held all kinds of jealousy and hate, seeing that he now had no way to target Ling Lan and the others, he could only behave, not doing anything stupid to try and harm them.

This week, after going through several spatial leaps, the starship arrived safely at their destination, a primitive planet they told outsiders was a wild and untamed planet.

After the final spatial leap, the communicators of Ling Lan and the other's had lost their locative functions. According to the starship's notification, this was because this area was one with magnetic interference, so all the locative systems on the communicators would be affected and lose their functionality. However, there was a much more advanced navigation system on board the starship, so they did not have to worry about completely losing their way.

Of course, Ling Lan knew very well that the starship's crew were lying, because Little Four told her that they had already entered an unknown planetary sector, an unlabelled location on the Federation star maps.

"As expected, a secret location. The planet we're going to is probably not as simple as

we imagine it to be." Ling Lan quietly raised her guard.

The starship entered the atmospheric layer of the primitive planet. Due to the starship's alert, Ling Lan and the others were already seated with their seatbelts buckled.

The starship shuddered violently for about 10 minutes or so before finally stabilizing. Ling Lan knew then that they had successfully penetrated the planet's atmosphere, and would soon land. Sure enough, after just a short while, the starship notified them to gather their things and disembark.

Ling Lan and the others put on their backpacks and grabbed their luggage. The moment they stepped out of the ship's doors, they were stunned by the scenery before them. This was because they found that right under their feet was a small city. It turned out that the starship had parked directly on a mountain peak right in the middle of a small city. The Federation had used some advanced technological method to cut this mountain at its waist, creating a large platform of several hundred thousand square units ², which provided plenty of space for the starship to land securely.

On the platform, many soldiers dressed in military uniform were directing the scouts off the ship and getting them into lines to ride the mountain top's cable car down to the city at the foot of the mountain.

When they arrived at the foot of the mountain, Ling Lan could finally see what the city looked like. The small city was extremely crude and simple. The houses were short and squat, appearing very much like the military barracks of Ling Lan's previous world. The strangest thing was that the outermost circle was not a thick and sturdy wall, but was instead an extremely tall railing made out of vertically erect posts. Was it because there was no danger here? Was that why they decided to put up a circle of posts just as a show of defense?

At the foot of the mountain, there were also soldiers to welcome them, who then brought the 50 students to an emptied camping ground. Right then, several thundering cracks sounded from not too far off, and when Ling Lan and the others turned to look, they saw a savage beast the size of an elephant stampeding towards them.

Ling Lan swiftly put down her backpack and pushed her hand into one of the bag's outer pockets to grab hold of her superior alloy short blades. The moment danger was

upon them, she would be able to kill the beast immediately with the sharp blades. Meanwhile, Qi Long, Wu Jiong, Li Yingjie, Luo Lang, and Ye Xu were only a step behind Ling Lan in reacting. Almost simultaneously, they all got ready for battle. Perhaps due to Ling Lan and the others calm handling of the situation, the other students also did not panic even though their reactions were slower. Several seconds later, they were all ready to fight.

The senior officer of the military camp was observing them silently. Seeing their response he nodded in satisfaction. "The scouts this time round are much better than those from last year. Their mental fortitude are all not bad! Especially those who reacted the fastest. They aren't much worse than the soldiers under us here."

The civil officer that looked like an advisor standing beside him said smilingly, "According to the captain of the *Fei Qiong* ³, these scouts are all pretty good, with some even being abnormal prodigies."

"Don't listen to that fellow's bullshit. In his eyes, anyone with a little bit of talent are all abnormal prodigies. His judgement is really quite terrible," sneered the senior officer.

When the advisor heard what his superior said, he just smiled and stopped commenting. In truth, he had felt that the captain of the *Fei Qiong* seemed different than usual when he was saying this. Something had been off about him, and his eyes had contained a kind of envy-jealousy-hate within them...

Still, since his superior didn't like this topic, then he wouldn't speak anymore on it to avoid displeasing his superior. Who asked his superior to be at odds with the captain of the *Fei Qiong* ?

Meanwhile, at this time, on the *Fei Qiong* which had already departed, Old Lian cackled evilly to himself. "Shi Yunfei, this old man just won't tell you how great these kids truly are. Whether or not you find that abnormal prodigy will all depend on your luck." He had no interest in helping an old foe increase his sect's strength.

Chapter 139

To Withdraw or to Remain?

The savage beast slammed into the railing, and just when everyone thought the railing was certain to break, what actually happened stunned them. Unexpectedly, the seemingly flimsy railing was actually very sturdy, and was even equipped with terrifying electrical power. When the beast crashed into the railing, the railing emitted a piercing zapping sound, sparking off arcs of electricity. Very quickly, the wild beast had been electrocuted into a pile of ash, falling onto the ground right outside the railing.

Only then did Ling Lan notice that there were many similar piles of ashes right outside the railing — looks like there were quite a number of wild beasts besides this one before them which committed suicide in this manner.

Han Jijyun couldn't help but exclaim, "An electric barrier fence!"

This cry caused expressions of realisation to dawn on the scouts' faces; only electric barrier fences would have such power.

It looked like the wild beasts on this planet were really not that simple, otherwise there would be no need to use the Federation's strongest protective measure. Ling Lan was not the only one to realise this. Many of the other students also thought of this, and their faces started to reveal traces of anxiety. They could already sense that the hunting course this time would not be as straightforward as they had imagined it to be.

"All students of the Central Scout Academy..." At this moment, a clarion voice was transmitted into the ears of all the students. "Welcome, everyone, to 'planet Wild and Savage' ¹. This time, you 50 students will be having your hunting course here. I sincerely hope that all of you will be able to complete this course... but even before completing the course, my biggest hope is that every one of you will be able to survive the hunt!"

This speech made the students anxious and doubtful. They did not know why a simple hunting course would involve their lives.

"You did not hear wrongly. This course may very well cost you your lives, because the wild beasts you will be facing won't be those tame animals you are used to. Instead, you will be facing beasts of a minimum level of H-class."

When the students heard that the lowest level they would be hunting would be H-class beasts, there was an instant uproar, and disbelief was written all over their faces.

The Federation had once announced to the public that there were all kinds of fierce beasts in the universe. Beasts below J-class were still within controllable range — in other words, the damage they could cause was not significant. But from J-class onwards, the beasts left the category of wild beasts and went straight into savage beast level. Of course, J-class beasts were still the weakest of the savage beasts — their strength was roughly at the level of Foundational combat stage level 2 to 3. Anyone with combat talent who had learned combat arts for three to four years would be able to handle them.

However, starting from I-class, it was different. The strength of the savage beasts then approached the Foundational combat stage levels 5 and 6. H-class monsters were even at Foundational combat stage levels 8 to 9; in other words, they were already half a step in the Manifestation stage.

Meanwhile, the students were mostly all at Foundational stage level 8 to 9, with only a few at the Manifestation stage. Against these H-class monsters, they would have no advantage whatsoever.

The students were bewildered by this — could this kind of situation still be considered a hunting class? This was basically asking them to gamble with their lives! Moreover, this was still only talking about the lowest class of monster here. If they were unlucky, they might even bump into a G-class, or perhaps even one of a higher level... wouldn't it be over for them then?

Right then, that clarion voice once again rang out by the students' ears, "Whether or not to continue with the course, the choice is up to you. There's still time for you to quit now. On your right hand side is the place to register to drop out. Now, you all have 3 minutes to choose..."

At that moment, to the right of Ling Lan and the other students, a soldier with an A.I. in one arm waved a hand at them, signalling for those who wanted to drop out to come find him.

This sudden choice caused the scouts to fall into indecision and uncertainty, unsure what they should do.

At this time, Wu Jiong pulled Ye Xu over to go towards Ling Lan to discuss the matter. To one side, Li Yingjie's gaze wavered for a moment, but then, with a clench of his teeth, he followed them.

"Ling Lan, what do you think?" asked Wu Jiong.

Ling Lan was rather surprised. She had never thought that Wu Jiong would come and ask for her opinion. Still, despite her surprise, she told Wu Jiong her decision honestly, "Continue with the course."

"Are you not afraid of the danger?" asked Wu Jiong. Then, feeling as if his words were not enough to convey what he meant, he added, "I'm talking about your team members." That day, Ling Lan's spar with the instructor had let Wu Jiong know that Ling Lan's strength was just too far beyond them — perhaps this hunt would be no danger at all for him, but the same could not be said for Han Jijyun, Lin Zhong-qing and the others on his team...

"Indeed, the hunt this time is very dangerous. It's very likely that what they said may happen. But this danger brings opportunity with it, as well as an increase of strength..." Ling Lan stopped here, turning to look at Qi Long and the others beside her, before continuing, "I also believe that Qi Long and the others will protect themselves well, and then become even stronger, finding the opportunities that belong to them."

That said, Ling Lan nodded solemnly and said, "They are just that strong!"

This last statement was said forcefully, with conviction, showing that Ling Lan's confidence in Qi Long and the others was absolute.

This statement also drew the brilliant smiles of Qi Long and the others, a sign of how touched they were by it. In that instant, their hearts pulsed with the intense emotions of being understood and accepted... Ling Lan's trust caused their initially unsteady hearts to settle immediately.

Wu Jiong cast a long look at Ling Lan, and then nodded and said, "That's true. Although the hunt this time is very dangerous, it is also a chance for us. Of course we can't give up this course."

Ling Lan nodded at Wu Jiong's words, saying nothing more. After hearing what Ling Lan and Wu Jiong had to say, Li Yingjie's initial doubts also disappeared. He told himself that he definitely could not lose to Ling Lan, Wu Jiong, and the others. What they could do, he could do too.

No one knew that Wu Jiong was actually a little disappointed at this point. He had questioned Ling Lan with an ulterior motive — he had hoped that Ling Lan would respond in an uncaring manner so that Qi Long and the others would begin to harbour a grudge in their hearts against him. He had not expected Ling Lan's response to make Qi Long and the others even more loyal to Ling Lan instead.

At this point, he knew that trying to get Qi Long and the others to leave Ling Lan and work with him instead was no longer a possibility. This also meant that his chances of overcoming Ling Lan were almost nil.

Yes, ever since the first year, Wu Jiong had never thought of admitting defeat. He had always wanted to beat Ling Lan. When he saw that beating Ling Lan on his own was not a feasible path, he had then chosen to challenge him with a team. He shifted his goal to the seventh grade, when they turned 13 and would challenge the virtual network barrier.

However, Ling Lan's team was also very strong, possessing the two combat talents Qi Long and Luo Lang. Still, Wu Jiong was not discouraged. He did not think that Qi Long and the others were really completely loyal to Ling Lan. Qi Long, especially, had always been the top rank of their class — was he really content to just be a puppet in Ling Lan's hands?

Thus, this time, he had specially asked a trick question. If Ling Lan had expressed blithe unconcern for his team members, he would be able to leverage this to spark Qi Long's dissatisfaction and cause the dissolution of Ling Lan's team. (When necessary, a team's member may choose to build their own team, and then the other members may choose once again whether to follow this member or the original leader, prompting a reorganization of the team. This was a failsafe to handle unresolvable conflicts within a team.)

But the final outcome disappointed him. The friendship among Ling Lan's team was truly like steel. Everyone knew their positions well, and there was no sign of the dissatisfaction he had thought there would be.

Frankly, Wu Jiong would think this way because he did not understand the position Ling Lan held in Qi Long and the others' hearts. The one who admired Ling Lan the most in Ling Lan's team was no other than Qi Long himself. It should be said that Ling Lan counted as half an instructor to Qi Long. Many times, when Qi Long encountered any difficulties in his combat skills, Ling Lan was the one who would enlighten him. Thus, Qi Long might not submit to others, but he would definitely submit to Ling Lan.

Meanwhile, Luo Lang had always been nipping at Qi Long's heels. He and Qi Long could actually be considered rivals. Whenever Qi Long was stuck, he was also stuck, and when Qi Long improved, he would also improve accordingly. If Ling Lan was half an instructor to Qi Long, then she was also half an instructor to Luo Lang. Therefore, Luo Lang had never considered leaving Ling Lan. His only hope was to one day step over Qi Long to become Ling Lan's number one follower. (Little Four jumped out indignantly here. Dammit, Boss's number one follower is meeeeeeeeeeee... (the subsequent several hundred thousand 'e's have been removed) ← unidentified entity found to have trespassed, please ignore.)

The one who had always harboured doubts towards Ling Lan was instead the inconspicuous Han Jijyun. Having just average combat ability in the class, he really liked using his brain to solve problems. Thus, he would not be convinced by those who were all brawn and no brain — no matter how strong they became, under certain creative strategies, he could still cause them to lose terribly. Later on, only after finding out that Ling Lan was actually very black-bellied himself (a large part of the credit here goes to Little Four; Ling Lan really wasn't as complicated as Han Jijyun thought her to be), did Han Jijyun become truly convinced and recognized Ling Lan as his boss.

As for Lin Zhong-qing, who entered the team last, he had pretty much sold himself to the team to become a member. Before gaining Ling Lan's full acknowledgement, all he was thinking about now was how to obtain Boss's sincere acceptance, so the notion of leaving Ling Lan had never even crossed his mind...

The three teams of Class-A simultaneously decided to continue with the course. Seeing this, the other students who had still been hesitating all said they would remain as well.

In fact, Ling Lan was the one who gave them the courage to remain. On the starship, Ling Lan's even fight with the instructor made them believe that as long as it wasn't a monster above G-class, Ling Lan should be able to defeat the beasts with no problem.

Although Ling Lan treated others coldly and his icy slackface did not seem very friendly, they believed that at critical moments, Ling Lan would definitely offer assistance.

The three minutes were soon up, and seeing that none of the students had chosen to leave, the senior officer was very pleased. "This group of brats are pretty good. Their wills are strong, unlike those from the last few years, which always had a few who chose to leave... in that case, we need to avoid any carelessness and stay alert. We really can't let anything bad happen to them ²."

"Don't worry, Sir! Our ace mecha squad is already fully prepared. Whenever the scouts are out hunting, they will be secretly protecting them from the skies. They'll definitely not let anything go wrong with the children," said the advisor with a smile.

Chapter 140

Hunting Preparations!

"That's good then. They are the best batch of this year's talents at the Central Scout Academy. Although it's too early to tell whether there are any aberrant prodigies among them right now, no matter what, they are the treasures of our Federation. We mustn't lose any of them." The senior officer's expression was serious. Every time these children came here, the pressure on him was unbelievably heavy — if any one of them died in an accident while hunting, it wouldn't end well for him.

After some thought, he still felt insecure, so the senior officer added this command, "Let the special-ops team on the ground follow them as well, to ensure protection from both the air and land."

"Roger that, Sir, I'll arrange it immediately!" responded the adviser. He then hurried to pass down this newest command so that the special-ops team could prepare to set out immediately.

Meanwhile, in the camping grounds, that clarion voice rang out once more, "Next, the students who hear their names, please come up to retrieve your chip, as well as your combat uniform and firearm."

With that, a troop of soldiers brought out a whole bunch of things in front of them, and began calling out their names one by one. Everyone went up to the registration point to collect the items mentioned, Ling Lan and the others included.

The chips would be their identity cards in this military camp. Credits that could only be used inside the camp could be saved within them, and could be used to buy things in the camp. Other than free accommodation, everything else in the military camp needed to be purchased using these credits. In other words, to live more comfortably, they would need to find a way to earn these credits — and hunting was just one of the ways. This was just another way of telling the students that only the strong had the right to live a better life — the principle of survival of the fittest being emphasized here once again.

Ling Lan followed the usage methods of the chip and inserted it into the

communicator on her wrist. Then, she saw the previous system of the communicator being shut down, and the new system was activated. On the chip, there was no name, just a number. Ling Lan's number was 017717. She peeked at Qi Long beside her, and saw that his number was 017709. It looked like these numbers were just randomly assigned by the computer to each of their 50 classmates, with no underlying pattern to be found.

The chips were preloaded with 1000 credits. This surprised Ling Lan, who had thought that there would be nothing inside. Unexpectedly, the camp was giving them some time to adjust, not being as merciless as she had assumed they would be. As long as they found a way to earn credits before these 1000 credits were used up, then they would be able to survive within this camp successfully.

Considering the fact that they were here for a hunting course, then it was likely that the beasts they hunted could be exchanged for credits. The only question was how much. Of course, Ling Lan was sure there were other exchange methods as well; she just didn't know them yet. Still, Ling Lan wasn't anxious. After all, they would be staying here for no less than 3 months, perhaps even longer, so there would be plenty of time for her to slowly figure everything out.

Ling Lan put on her combat uniform. The clothes fit her almost perfectly — the academy had probably sent their data over to the military beforehand so they would be able to get the correct sizes for the children.

After obtaining these items, the originally anxious students felt a little more secure. The combat uniforms had a certain degree of defensive ability, able to withstand two or three attacks from an H-class savage beast, which would give the students a little more to bank on when protecting themselves. Meanwhile, the firearms provided were all beam handguns, only meant for defence. The firearms were there just in case the students found themselves surrounded by savage beasts and needed the firepower to blast a bloody trail through the beasts to escape...

The hunting course required them to use cold weapons with their own hands to kill the savage beasts. This was also why Ling Lan had brought two high-efficiency alloy blades. Ling Lan could handle the short blade type of cold weapons well with both hands; in particular, her right hand was so proficient with them that it could be said that it was godlike. However, Ling Lan's left hand was actually most proficient with the tri-edge trench knife. But since almost no one in this era knew how to use the tri-edge trench knife, Ling Lan had no choice but to shelve it for now, otherwise she would not

be able to explain how she had learned how to use it.

Ling Lan placed one of the high-efficiency alloy short blades into the outer pocket of her combat uniform by her hip. The other she stuffed into the back of her belt. The one on her belt was prepared for her left hand. In a critical moment, she would be able to draw out the blade in time to hack at a savage beast.

From the start, Ling Lan had been a dual-wielding combatant — she had just projected the appearance of being a right-handed fighter to the outside world to hide her true strength.

After finishing her preparations, Ling Lan took a look around. She saw that the expressions on the students' faces were casual and relaxed after changing into their combat uniforms, and could not help but frown.

It was true that the combat uniforms could withstand two or three attacks from an H-class savage beast — however, this just meant that the other's attack would not break the combat uniform, the force behind the attack would still not be completely negated. 3 to 4 layers of the power behind the attack would still be conveyed to the body, so if the body was not strong enough, the victim would still have their bones broken or incur some internal damage from the force of the attack. Therefore, they could not relax just because they had the uniforms.

In Ling Lan's opinion, they should avoid being hit if they could help it. Otherwise, each hit would bring either death or injury.

Ling Lan gave a serious warning to Qi Long and the others, dousing their excitement from obtaining the combat uniforms. Their expressions turned grim instantly, knowing that they had relaxed too soon. It was just as Ling Lan cautioned — even though the combat uniforms would increase their chances of survival, that did not mean it was foolproof. Everything still depended on their own capability to work hard and survive this cruel hunting exercise.

Once everyone was ready, Ling Lan raised her head to glance at the sun. Even after half a day, it had not shifted in position, still hanging high up in the sky.

Ling Lan found a soldier on duty in the camp and asked him about the planet, and found out that the switch between day and night here was different from that of the star system they lived in. A day here consisted of 120 hours, and the nights were just

as long. The watch soldier also told Ling Lan that the mass of this primitive planet was just too large, which was why one self-rotation required that much time.

As for how they decided when to eat or sleep, the decision was up to them. After all, every person had different adaptability, and the rest time they needed varied as well.

Ling Lan then asked about the departure time for the hunt, and was told that a car would bring them to the hunting grounds from the campsite in an hour. As such, Ling Lan decided to first go and fill up her belly, lest she have no strength to hunt later due to hunger.

She also asked about the food matters of the students, and learned that there was a special large canteen set up to provide meals for the campground staff. There, one could eat whenever they wanted, though the food needed to be purchased with credits.

Ling Lan did not continue to inquire further after that. Instead, she led Qi Long and the others straight to the canteen. Wu Jiong's team, which had been keeping an eye out on her movements, knew what she was planning, and decided to follow her lead.

The two teams ate a meal of the simplest and cheapest fast food, which costed them 50 credits each. Ling Lan noticed then that the camp really was not giving them much time to prepare at all — if they could not find a way to earn money after three days, they would not be able to afford any more food...

While they ate, Han Jijyun suggested that they first head to the credit exchange area to learn how they could earn more credits. He felt that they needed to learn the trading methods here before they went hunting, especially with regards to the exchange rates for the beasts. They wouldn't want to kill a savage beast after much difficulty just to find out that it wasn't worth much credits... that would be such a waste.

Ling Lan agreed that that was wise. So, everyone sped up to finish their meal, cleaning their bowls out within a few minutes. Then, they hurried to the credit exchange point to inquire about the various ways to trade for credits. There, they found that only the path of hunting had been left for the students.

It looked like the camp was worried that the students might put too much priority on surviving that they would forget the main purpose of their trip. Thus, they might as well fix the credit exchange method of the students from the start. Fortunately, the

items they would be able to get from most of the savage beasts were all worth quite a lot — as long as they caught something every day, they definitely would not starve.

Ling Lan then spent another hundred credits to buy a copy of this planet's catalogue of savage beasts, saving it into her communicator.

Although Ling Lan's heart ached a little at the loss of this 100 credits, she felt that it was money well spent, because the data on the savage beasts on the catalogue was very comprehensive. Their physical characteristics, attack methods, strengths and weaknesses, and even their skills were detailed very clearly. Besides that, the catalogue also contained a detailed listing of the exchange prices of all the different parts of the various savage beasts. This way, they would be able to target the more valuable savage beasts when hunting, gaining much more for the same amount of effort.

After preparing all this, Ling Lan then brought her team back to the assembly point for the students. As Wu Jiong's followers had not known what Ling Lan's group was planning, they had eaten at a slower pace. By the time they finished their meal and got out, they had already lost sight of Ling Lan's team, and so could only slink back sullenly to the assembly point. Thus, they were already there before Ling Lan's team.

Not long after, a stout officer led a squad over to them. Looking at the little bean sprouts in front of him, he chuckled and said, "Hi, darling brats! I'm your leader for the activity this time. Please call me 'leader'."

Seeing the scouts' attention all on him, he continued, "Later, I will be taking you all to the hunting grounds. Remember, listen to my commands. Don't act on your own, or else don't blame me for not warning you when you die."

The officer's words caused the students' hearts to leap up into their throats once again.

"Also, do you all have any teams? Team leaders, raise your hands," asked the officer.

Among the students, six hands, including Ling Lan's, were raised. The officer's brows creased. He had not expected there to be so few teams in this term's batch of students. Initially, he had thought that in teams, the students would be able to coordinate and work together better, increasing the safety of the hunt. However, the current situation was not as good as he had hoped.

Helplessly, he raised his right hand and shouted, "Those with teams, leaders, bring your team members over here to my right hand side. Team leaders stand first in line, all teams in a row."

Very quickly, Ling Lan and the others had lined up by the officer's side. Qi Long stood in for Ling Lan as the leader at the front. Just like that, the six teams made six lines, and it became clear that Ling Lan's team was the one with the most members, five people. Meanwhile, the other teams had either four or three people, with one team even having only two.

Chapter 141

The First Hunting Lesson

This scene caused the officer to smile wryly, thinking to himself that the scouts this year were really such oddballs. In the past, the scouts who came were all mostly already in their own teams, and all those teams basically had all 6 members. But this term, not only were there very few teams, the teams were not even filled yet. He found it annoying just looking at the sparse teams.

"Why are there so few team members?" asked the officer unhappily to all the team leaders.

"My team is actually full, but the other two members are not in Class-A." Li Yingjie was the first to respond.

"Still in the process of choosing. No final decision yet." This was what Wu Jiong had to say.

"Um... the ones I like have already joined other teams, and the ones who haven't joined a team yet, I don't see any I like," said Qi Long with a grin, scratching his head, adding a touch of goofiness to his demeanour.

"I want to take in more people, but they don't want to join me," said one of the team leaders with a long face. Who asked everyone to have their eye on Ling Lan's and Wu Jiong's respective teams?

"Ditto +1!" Another team leader had a similarly long face.

"Ditto +2!" The final team leader was also part of the long face clan.

The officer was unsure whether to laugh or cry at the humorous words of the last three team leaders. He then turned to ask the other students, "What about you all? Why didn't you choose to join a team, or make your own team?"

All was silent, so the officer pointed at one of the students at random. "You, answer!"

That student truly bemoaned his bad luck, actually being called on to answer. Sullenly, he replied, "If I made my own team or joined another team, then I would lose the chance to join Ling Lan's or Wu Jiong's team. We all do not want to lose these final three chances."

"Alright, alright, so you all have your considerations." The officer stared doubtfully at Qi Long and Wu Jiong, uncertain what sort of charisma they had to make the other students so tenacious. However, there was no way to continue on like this, so the officer grinned sardonically and said, "I don't care about these messy considerations of yours. Here, my word is law. Right now, I command you all to quickly get into temporary teams of five. Give me the name list in 3 minutes. If you still don't have a team then, I will randomly assign you one."

The officer swept his gaze at Qi Long. "Since your team is already full, I won't make any changes. You all can wait over there." The officer pointed out a direction, signalling for Qi Long and his team to move there.

Qi Long and the others were very happy that they could remain with Boss Ling Lan. This gave them a lot more confidence.

The students reacted swiftly. It took only 5 minutes for 10 teams to form. To ensure his team's combat ability, Wu Jiong chose a classmate ranked in the top 10 to join his team, while Li Yingjie had managed to secure the 13th-rank for his team. The other students teamed up according to how well they got along with one another.

Seeing that the students were all ready, the officer waved expansively and shouted, "Depart!"

The scouts charged aggressively towards the entrance of the camping grounds, and there they found a huge vehicle which greatly resembled a fully enclosed armoured car of Ling Lan's past world, but was five or six times bigger. The officer indicated for the students to get into the vehicle.

Ling Lan felt the vehicle start up and move. Along the way, she even felt the body of the vehicle being crashed into by some large force, causing several loud bangs. Seeing the anxious and curious faces of the students, the officer in the same carriage explained, "This is just the savage beasts attacking. Don't worry, this area is mostly just beasts below G-class. They won't be able to do any damage to this transport car."

"Won't any higher class savage beasts appear?" asked one of the students.

"I've lived here for 3 years and that has never happened. The savage beasts on this planet are all territorial, so the savage beasts normally won't leave the area they live in," explained the officer. Seeing that everyone was still anxious, he then shared the greatest trump of the camp. "We have heavy artillery on the transport car, capable of killing savage beasts below E-class."

At that, the students released relieved sighs, and waited calmly for the transport car to bring them to the hunting grounds.

After travelling for not even half an hour, the transport car stopped. The car door swung open, and Ling Lan and the others disembarked under the officer's direction to find that there was a temporary outpost here.

The officer pointed at the thick forest in front of them and said in introduction, "This is the H-class hunting area which has been specially set up just for you all. Right now, mark down the coordinates of this location. You must not go beyond the radius of this coordinate by 10 kilometres."

He then pointed at the temporary outpost behind him and said, "This is a temporary rest area provided for you all. The fence around the perimeter is also an electric barrier fence, definitely capable of withstanding multiple attacks by H-class savage beasts. Inside, there is also an exchange station. Also, if you want to return to the main camp, either you walk back, or you'll have to buy a return ticket. And each return ticket requires 500 credits..."

The officer's mouth split into a grin, and he said with some malicious glee, "So, please work hard and earn money!"

That said, without waiting for a response from the stunned students, he leapt onto the transport vehicle, which then zoomed away from the area, leaving the students with nothing but faces full of dust.

Slow on the uptake, the students only realised they had been abandoned by the heartless officer after the vehicle was no longer visible. They broke out into angry curses, yelling loudly of the other's despicable shamelessness, actually leaving without teaching them anything.

Han Jijyun ignored the uproar beside him, turning to ask Ling Lan, "Check out the outpost or just go hunting straightaway?"

Ling Lan said impassively, "The outpost won't run away, we can always check it out when we get back. We need to get a better idea of this area before nightfall so we can create a hunting plan tonight."

Ling Lan's decision gained everybody's agreement. Or, we should say, since Ling Lan had decided so, no one else in the team would have any objections. Thus, the five of them swiftly put on their backpacks and headed towards the forest ahead.

Seeing the movements of Ling Lan's team, the other teams put a lid on their anger and began moving as well. Some teams chose to enter the temporary outpost to check it out, while other teams followed Ling Lan's team to enter the hunting area, getting ready for their first hunt.

At this moment, several kilometres in the air above Ling Lan and the others, a mecha battle squad was monitoring the area. Seeing some of the scout teams begin to hunt, their captain gave the following orders to his subordinates. "Each person is responsible for one team. Don't let them come to any harm."

"Roger that, Captain!"

"M1702, choosing the first team!"

"M1703, choosing the second team!"

"M1704, choosing the fifth team!"

"M1705, choosing the..."

Meanwhile, in a different direction, on a mountain slope several kilometres away, a bestial mecha squad was also monitoring the area.

"Little ones, have you chosen your targets?"

"Boss, don't worry, we've all chosen..."

"Pity there aren't any lolis, can't push any of them down..."

"Shotas are just as good for that, you sleazy uncle."

"Don't look at me that way, it's just my fatherly love overflowing..."

"Che..." This group of people, though noisy and flippant in their unfiltered speech, were nevertheless precise in their movements. Controlling their bestial mecha, they made their way skilfully through the forest, surreptitiously tailing the respective scout teams they had chosen to protect.

Qi Long was the spearhead of Ling Lan's team, with Han Jijyun in the middle, Luo Lang and Lin Zhong-qing at both flanks, and Ling Lan at the back of the formation. Han Jijyun's combat skills were the worst among them, so before they figured out the true strength of the savage beasts in this area, Ling Lan had no choice but to use this safest formation.

It was extremely calm the whole way through — they didn't encounter any so-called savage beasts. After walking 300 to 400 metres into the forest, Ling Lan's gaze suddenly flickered and her head twitched minutely towards the left. She could clearly sense that a savage beast was approaching from that direction.

A few seconds later, Qi Long also sensed it. He quickly gave a warning, "It looks like a savage beast is coming. Everyone watch out."

Hearing this, everyone tightened their grips on their weapons, focused intently on the direction they were in charge of defending. No one knew what the first H-class savage beast they encountered would be like and where it would attack from.

The wait wasn't very long. Within a few seconds, a burly grey figure leapt out from the short shrubs on their left side. Its chosen target was the one standing closest to it, Luo Lang.

Long prepared, Luo Lang swung the high-frequency blade at the figure in a hurried arc. Perhaps Luo Lang's counterattack was too swift, catching the opponent by surprise, for it was struck dead on by Luo Lang's attack.

A wailing howl rang out, and the grey silhouette twisted in the air to land nimbly on its feet. The powerful attack by Luo Lang had not damaged it at all.

At this time, everyone could finally see what it really looked like. It was about the size of a large dog, and was covered in a coat of long grey hair. Its head was like a rabbit from Ling Lan's past world, but was 4 or 5 times larger than a rabbit's head. Meanwhile, its tail was not short and small, but thin and long, with countless scales on it instead of hair. With a subconscious flick of its tail, a crisp crackling sound rang out, and there were now several thin gouges in the tough packed earth. It was obvious that its tail was immensely powerful.

"Flash rabbit, speed-type H-class savage beast. Attack methods: mouth, claws, tail. Strength: Immense speed, almost undetectable. Thick and tough skin, unable to be injured by normal strength. Weakness: Predictable attacks. Very impatient. Exchange value: Skin and fur, 10—100 or more (depending on the integrity of the item). Claws (whole), 20 each. Tail (whole), 100."

Ling Lan read out the information on the flash rabbit immediately. Her memory was amazing, almost to the extent of having a photographic memory. Of course, even if she forgot, Little Four had already saved all the information on the savage beasts and would have reminded her.

Listening to Ling Lan's recitation, Qi Long's gaze shone brighter and brighter — this was all money!

"Looks like it will be our first quarry." Lin Zhong-qing was equally as excited.

The flash rabbit was the weakest among all the H-class savage beasts. As such, there were not many things of value on it, only three. However, this did not beat the fact that it was the easiest savage beast to hunt. Not only could it allow them to practise on it to familiarize themselves with hunting, they would also profit from it somewhat — this was a great thing!

"In that case, Lin Zhong-qing, we'll leave this quarry to you," said Ling Lan calmly.

In their team, Lin Zhong-qing was the nimble and speedy type. Thus, hunting a flash rabbit as practice was perfect for him, very likely to trigger some insight.

The objective of hunting was not simply to take down a quarry, but also to learn how to hunt game that was most suited to one's abilities. This was the first lesson of

hunting, known as 'know thyself, know thy enemy'.

Chapter 142

Enemy Attack? Enemy Attack!

Under Ling Lan's planning, every member of Ling Lan's team experienced hunting solo. After a week, Ling Lan felt that the others had already gotten used to hunting, and were able to work together well with great rapport. So, she decided not to move around with them anymore.

Ling Lan had only been following them around this week primarily because she wanted to protect them, afraid that they might encounter some unexpected scenarios. It wasn't that Ling Lan didn't want to go off on her own to the areas with higher class savage beasts, but, Little Four told her that there were mecha convoys from the camp scattered around watching over them, both in the air and on the ground. However, with the passage of time, the number of mecha gradually decreased.

Thus, Ling Lan could only bide her time at the temporary outpost. Still, she had the learning space, so it wasn't a complete waste of time. However, these actions of Ling Lan drew the contempt of the mecha operators protecting the students from the skies...

Just take today for example. After sending Qi Long and the others off at the gates of the temporary outpost, Ling Lan ambled back to the living quarters and lay down to sleep. This lazy and unmotivated demeanour of hers instantly infuriated the mecha operator in charge of this area.

"Hells, this punk is such a goddamn rascal, not going out to hunt again," said the mecha operator angrily to his teammates.

By this point, the mecha operators were no longer protecting the teams individually, but was keeping track of them through radar monitoring. Any hunting team that entered the range of the area they monitored would fall under their protection.

This particular mecha operator's protection range just happened to include the temporary outpost. Every time he saw Ling Lan remaining at the outpost on his own, sleeping sweetly without a care in the world, his mood would take a deep nosedive. He felt that Ling Lan was not living up to all of their expectations.

"Could it be that his credits haven't been used up yet?" One of his teammates asked him distractedly as he gathered information on the hunting teams within their protection range. Many of the children just did not have the guts to go out and hunt unless absolutely necessary.

"If that was the case, I wouldn't be so angry! I'd just have to wait for him to reach that critical point. But he just goddamn won't ever run out of credits because his teammates are actually willing to provide for him without any complaint!" Extremely disgruntled, the mecha operator's voice was deep and sullen. "Even though they returned every single time covered in injuries, they would still just smile and give the quarry they hunted to that brat, and let him exchange it for credits and continue to remain in the temporary outpost."

The operator was somewhat envious, but his heart also ached for those children. For the sake of such an unmotivated and useless teammate, were their actions worth it?

"Ho! Looks like that punk's interpersonal skills are pretty good then." Being able to get his teammates to provide for him willingly was also an accomplishment. The other mecha operators could not help but exclaim in awe.

"Could it be that the punk has an impressive background?" Of course, someone would think of this — maybe this was the reason why those children didn't dare to not support him?

"I asked the captain, and he said that he doesn't have any notable background. It's just that his father died long before he was born in a battle with the Twilight Empire." Very early on, the mecha operator in charge had already asked the captain to investigate the child's data, and found that his background was very average. Even more average than those of his teammates, Qi Long and Luo Lang.

"Perhaps those children pity him for being an orphan of a martyr. Giving him some consideration because of that would be normal," someone speculated.

"That's not the way to be considerate. They are here to see blood — if this brat never sees blood, then how will he grow? Don't they know that this is actually harming him?" The mecha operator in charge was somewhat distressed at the waste of talent.

"What are you worrying for? If he doesn't want to grow stronger, what can we do..." The other's words had barely faded when he suddenly gasped in shock, and asked

doubtfully, "Look up there, what's that?" When he had been browsing through the images, a light had seemed to flicker at the top of the screen. He adjusted the image, and found that countless bright spots had appeared on it, and could not hold back a shout.

All of the mecha in the air immediately pulled up their images as well, and saw that there really were countless bright spots descending from the atmosphere.

"What's going on? Why didn't the camp control tower give us a report?"

"Could it be an enemy attack?"

"No way..."

Just when those aerial mecha operators were at a loss, Ling Lan, who had already entered the learning space and had started practising her physical skills, sensed a strong signal calling her from the outside. She decisively ended her training and returned to the great hall of the learning space. There, she saw Little Four with an anxious face, who rushed to say, "Boss, I just did an aerial scan, and discovered a mysterious force invading this planet!"

Ling Lan's face changed. She quickly returned to the real world, leapt up from her bed, and rushed out.

Standing in the square of the temporary outpost, she lifted her head to look up at the sky, and could vaguely see several glimmering lights in the skies above.

"Little Four, lock onto one of those bright spots and zoom in," ordered Ling Lan.

A close-up of the scene right by a bright spot abruptly appeared before Ling Lan's eyes. The bright spot turned out to be a giant elliptical metal object. Its outer shell was smooth and glossy, and it looked just like a large egg made of metal — there was no way to tell what it was. Its speed of descent was not very quick, just as if there was a reactionary force pushing against the planet's gravity.

Ling Lan's brows furrowed, suddenly thinking of something. She yelled out quickly, "Little Four, could you check to see into outer space?"

"From here, I'll need to hack into the radar here. Boss, hold on for a few seconds..." That said, Little Four left. Ling Lan counted under her breath, and when she reached

9, the image before her suddenly shifted to an image of the space right beyond this planet.

In space, there was nothing. All was silent, just as if those unidentified flying objects had just appeared in their vision from thin air.

"The other side might be using some cloaking system to evade radar scanning, and so were not discovered," explained Little Four, "Let me try to change their radar scanning system..." This so-called 'cloaking' was not true concealment — it was just recognizing an opponent's radar scanning system and preparing a corresponding countermeasure. So, a minor modification to the scanning system would solve the problem.

Little Four's words had yet to fade when Ling Lan saw two massive interstellar motherships suddenly appear in a corner of the initially boundless starry sky. Beside them were four escort starships. Right then, those elliptical metal objects were being launched in a never-ending stream from the mothership's launch port. The four escort starships were positioned at four corners, carefully guarding the two motherships in the centre.

"Searching for their emblem..."

The starships within the image began to rotate, until, on one side of one of the ships, a blood-red sun was revealed...

"The Twilight Empire..." Ling Lan's gaze narrowed, her mind swiftly registering the severity of the matter. Immediately, she said, "Quick, transmit the images to the camp's control tower..."

"Already done." Little Four had instantly transmitted those images to the control tower.

Ling Lan's gaze filled up with killing intent — the Twilight Empire... that was the main culprit in her father Ling Xiao's murder. She had originally thought that she would only get the chance to get revenge and kill the people of the Twilight Empire once she grew up, but unexpectedly, this opportunity had presented itself here at this mysterious planet.

Of course, Ling Lan also knew very well that their appearance here most likely meant that some problems had also emerged within the inner workings of the Federation,

just like back when Ling Xiao had been killed. Only this time, she wondered who their target was.

When the control tower received Little Four's transmitted images, they instantly sounded the alarm... The entire camp leapt into action under the blaring cacophony of the alarms. All the resting soldiers rushed out, grabbing their weapons and their mecha.

Meanwhile, the mecha operators in the air still observing those unidentified bright spots in the atmosphere had also received the warning of an enemy attack from the control tower.

"Warning, this is an enemy attack...! Warning, this is an enemy attack!"

"Get ready for battle!" The cold voice of the captain came through the public communications channel.

"Yes!" All of the mecha were fully armed, and they watched suspiciously as those countless flying objects drifted down towards their planet. The moment the captain gave the command, they would charge.

In the meantime, the hunting students had also received the notification to return to the camp or the closest outpost.

When the opponent had drifted down to a certain altitude, the flight-capable winged mecha or humanoid mecha all flew up into the sky as well, waiting in formation.

Meanwhile, in space, the commanding officer of the mothership who had supervised the launching of the metallic giant eggs, was closely watching the feedback images of the situation below. When he saw that the opponent had already noticed them and were prepared to attack, he instantly pounded the table in anger. "Baka¹, how did they discover our concealed airstrike strategy? Which bastard ratted us out?!"

Originally, they had wanted to overwhelm the opponent with the element of surprise, but was unexpectedly faced with this sort of direct faceoff. His heart started to twinge in pain — the sneak attack this time involved their empire's most exceptional mecha

column, if any accidents happened and they were lost here, it would definitely be a severe loss.

This commanding officer naturally didn't know that the reason the opponent was prepared was due to Little Four, this intelligent bio-entity from the miraculous planet Mandora...

"Attack!" When the control tower gave this command, all the air-borne mecha launched the first wave of attack. The metallic eggs right at the bottom were instantly caught in the explosions of this intense firepower. Losing the anti-gravity deceleration, they dropped like stones, hurtling downwards at full speed. The mecha in formation paid no mind to these falling eggs — everyone knew that at that speed, even if there were protective fittings inside, the people inside would still be at death's door even if they didn't die.

These images were transmitted back to the motherships in space, causing the commanding officer to yell 'baka baka' non-stop, yet he was helpless to do anything. Now that things had developed into the current situation, it was no longer something he could resolve.

"Sir, can we let them break out of the shells and act now?" The adviser beside the officer wiped away the sweat on his forehead, and reminded him with a bow. Since there was already no chance of a sneak attack, they might as well fight outright pitting strength against strength.

" Sano-kun's ²suggestion is good. Give out the order to act!" The commanding officer finally calmed down.

" Hai ³!"

Once the order went out, all the falling metallic eggs cracked open by themselves, revealing the black mecha hiding within each one. The sight of those black mecha, along with the crimson sun emblazoned on their chests instantly drove all the Federation's mecha operator's into a collective rage.

"Curses, it's mecha!"

"The bloody Twilight Empire!"

"Dammit, kill them all... avenge Major General Ling Xiao!" It wasn't clear which mecha operator said this, but it summed up the burning animosity of the mecha operators well.

Chapter 143

The Mecha Battle Kicks Off!

Major General Ling Xiao's death due to one of the Twilight Empire's evil plots was a major grudge for all mecha operators of the Federation. They too had once thought of charging onto the battlefields against the Twilight Empire for revenge, but they were soldiers, and so had to submit to the military's arrangements. They had been assigned to develop this mysterious planet, but the rage in their hearts had not disappeared. Now, suddenly seeing the hated killers appear before them, almost all of the mecha operators were about to go on a rampage.

Everyone present on the field knew that this would be a death clash, a fight till one side or the other was dead!

The artillery in the hands of the Federation mecha operators needed no command, firing wildly in an endless barrage. A great battle was about to start... in the sky, the sounds of rocket fire filled the air — the Twilight Empire mecha naturally did not just lay back and admit defeat. Even if they had no choice but to dodge while they were still trying to gain control of their mecha, they would still raise up their firearms when necessary to return fire.

The entire battlefield was shrouded in the smoke of artillery — with every round of fire, several mecha would be destroyed and fall... some of the Federation, more of those from the Twilight Empire.

Those mecha plunged from the skies wreathed in thick smoke and blazing fire, crashing loudly onto the ground. Even Ling Lan, who was quite far away from the heart of the battle, could still feel the violent tremors from the ground, almost losing her footing.

On the ground, those mecha would explode a second or even a third time. Shrapnel went flying, wisps of flame scattering everywhere — the immense explosive force broke the surrounding trees at their waists, some trees even being uprooted entirely. Yet even more trees were set alight by the errant sparks, quickly becoming engulfed in flames...

Under the barrage of artillery, the initially tranquil primitive forest descended into a sea of smoke and fire. The savage beasts within seemed to sense the looming threat, and began to make a commotion.

The descending Twilight mecha were getting closer and closer to the Federation mecha soldiers in the air; at this point, the camp control tower gave a new order, "All aerial mecha squads, move out immediately!"

This command proved that the battle had already entered the most intense close-combat stage. The outcome of this battle now would be determined entirely by whose nation's mecha operators were stronger.

From the start, this world had been a world governed by the principle of the survival of the fittest — only by being stronger than the opponent could you have the right to continue surviving.

All the Federation mecha operators who received the order operated their mecha to fly towards those incoming Empire mecha. In the skies of this planet, blue-white mecha and black mecha clashed, battling it out with one another.

The supreme commander of the camp looked at the starships hovering in space on the screen before him. Rage spiked in his heart, and he threw the phone receiver in his hand roughly at the ground, where it instantly broke apart.

Raging, he said, "Goddammit! If these bastards weren't here, how would I have let these despicable mecha land so easily... Damn! Now we can only rely on the mecha teams to hold them off with force."

On the other end of the phone receiver, the technician soldier silently wiped away the cold sweat on his forehead. He was thankful that he had managed to react quickly enough to shut down the functions of the receiver moments before the commanding officer had smashed it, saving the eardrums of his teammates.

It turned out that the secret headquarters on this planet was equipped with anti-aircraft artillery. However, due to the threat of the starships in outer space, the supreme commander did not dare to use them. This made him feel extremely frustrated and was the main source of his rage.

The commanding officer could almost confirm that the Twilight Empire was just using these mecha to try and entice them into firing their anti-aircraft missiles. After finding out that the opponent was the Twilight Empire, the commanding officer knew that even if the opponent had found the coordinates to this planet, they still would not know the detailed location of the Federation's secret headquarters on the planet.

If the opponent had known for sure where the headquarters was, they definitely would not have first let the mecha descend for a sneak attack. Instead, they would have just opened fire with the starships, directly blowing up their main command centre right from the start. This way, without any proper command, the Federation warriors would definitely not be able to muster up any effective resistance. The Empire would have been able to easily assume control of this planet.

If he had not discovered the opponent's starships, he might very well have already given the command for the camp to fire their anti-aircraft missiles. He could almost see the final outcome then... those few starships of the Twilight Empire would then have figured out where they were hiding, and sent all their firepower on board towards them, completely destroying this location, vaporizing every last bit of them, leaving no bodies behind.

At this thought, the commanding officer felt a lingering frisson of fear in his heart. Luckily the radar had worked in the end, managing to detect those concealed starships and motherships. This also made him instantly aware of the opponent's scheme, saving him from giving out a wrong order.

The commanding officer collected his emotions, and turned to ask the chief of staff beside him, "When will the reinforcement teams arrive?" Although he had seen through the opponent's dangerous scheme, the situation right now still wasn't looking good.

"The crew closest to us is at the Misri Corridor area. Even if they rush over at top speed, it is estimated to take about 10 hours," reported the chief of staff.

"Hold out for 10 hours, is it?" The supreme commander frowned, considering whether it was possible to hold out for 10 hours with his current forces.

"Commander, there's more bad news I have to tell you..." The chief of staff had received the latest updates from the other staff officers, and he now looked somewhat ill. "The forces just sent word that just now, a Twilight Empire fleet was seen in the vicinity of

planet Qiming."

The supreme commander hurriedly tapped on the star map on a screen and compared the distance between the two locations. He could not help but curse! This was because the distance from the Misri Corridor and that from planet Qiming were roughly the same. In other words, 10 hours later, the opponent would also receive reinforcements.

"Contact military headquarters immediately. Tell them to send even more fleets over. No matter how long it'll take them to come, we will hold out till the end!" That said, the supreme commander turned and left the control tower. This surprised the chief of staff who had begun making arrangements for his commands. He asked, "Commander, where are you going?"

"Where? To fight! Am I supposed to just sit here and wait? My soldiers are all battling courageously right now!" With an angry glare, the commander stalked onto the control tower's elevator platform to go down, not giving the chief of staff any time to stop him.

Nimbly, he climbed into his own mecha, and after activating it, he piloted it to fly up to the aerial battlefield. Behind him, his bodyguard mecha team followed swiftly... the commander they were supposed to protect had already chosen to battle, of course they could not stay back.

"Ahem, this fellow... that's so irresponsible!" The chief of staff looked at the back of the commander who had leapt into battle, and muttered unhappily to himself. Still, he could only complain a little in protest — against the formidable commander whose very nature was that of an extreme battle maniac, all he could do was resign himself to his bad luck and clean up after him.

"Baka! The opponent actually chose not to use their anti-aircraft missiles but fight in close quarters with mecha? Are they that confident in their own mecha operators? What do you all think?" In space, the commanding officer on the mothership saw that their plans had failed once again. Their originally perfect strategies, all failing — this caused him to be extremely displeased and angry.

"Commander, don't worry. Among the mecha operators executing the air strike this time is a team of our empire's ace mecha escorts. As long as they land successfully, the

opponent's mecha operators will definitely be no match for them." The staff officer beside him quickly offered reassurance, boosting the commanding officer's confidence, "They will definitely complete this 'Operation Decapitation'!"

There were many strategies; they too had thought of all kinds of unfavourable contingencies. As long as the ace mecha troop landed successfully, they would carry out 'Operation Decapitation' — seek out the opponent's command centre and destroy it so that the opponent would have no organisation, and hence lose all form of effective resistance.

" Yoshi ¹ ! I hope they don't disgrace our great Twilight Empire." Once more, the commanding officer felt as if he had the situation well in hand.

On the planet, right now, there were the sounds of countless firearms being fired. The temporary outpost was also ringing with the warning blares alerting the troops of an air attack. Some on-duty soldiers were directing non-combatants to the nearest air raid shelter, but their main responsibility was to help those students at the outpost who were scared shitless.

"Bastard, stop running around recklessly! Come back quickly!" A soldier on duty at the outpost was currently gathering all the students hiding all around the outpost. When he saw Ling Lan standing at the entrance of the outpost looking around randomly, he instantly yelled at him anxiously.

Suddenly, from god knows where, a bomb fell — the soldier leapt frantically at Ling Lan... then, he felt his body being tugged aside by something, causing him to tumble in another direction, dropping straight into a trench dug by the camp.

"Boom!" The bomb exploded on the other side. But because they were inside the trench, they were completely uninjured. The soldier raised his head, bewildered, and saw a small figure crouched in front of him.

"Big Brother, thank you for saving me." That charming young shota had a serious expression on his face, but the immense gratitude he held in his eyes was unmistakable.

Although the soldier was still wondering how he had suddenly changed course in mid-air, the two of them had indeed been saved by the shift in direction. As such, he could

only scratch his head in confusion and say, "As long as you're alright! As long as you're alright!"

Then, realising something, he asked, "Why didn't you go to the air raid shelters?" The camp had informed the students the coordinates of all the air raid shelters at the first moment, letting them choose the nearest air raid shelter to hide at. Fearing that the students would be scared stiff by this sort of ruthless battle scene, they had then sent some on-duty staff to check up on them, which was why this soldier had appeared here at the outpost.

"I wanted to go, but was still checking the directions, confirming the coordinates." Ling Lan gave a perfectly normal reason. In the midst of an unforeseen event, it was very easy to lose one's direction in the chaos.

The soldier had already seen scouts in this sort of situation an nth number of times, and so merely pointed at a direction and said, "You just walk in this direction, and then look at the coordinate numbers on your communicator, and you should be able to find an air raid shelter."

"Thank you, big brother. Then I'll be leaving first!" Ling Lan gave him a grateful scout's salute, and then jumped out of the trench, quickly disappearing into the distance.

The soldier pulled on his helmet and carefully moved forwards in a low crouch. He needed to continue checking the next location. After moving stealthily in this way for several tens of metres, he abruptly realised that the other's movements had been much more agile than his...

Chapter 144

Chance! Make a Move!

Ling Lan did not choose to go to that air raid shelter; instead, she secretly hid at a random blind spot within the outpost. With Little Four's help, she contacted Qi Long.

"Qi Long, where are you guys now?"

"Boss Lan, finally got hold of you. We can't go back anymore," said Qi Long, chuckling drily.

"What happened?" asked Ling Lan in surprise.

"The road we need to go back is now a battlefield!" The sound of violent hacking and slashing could be heard from Qi Long's end — the sound was so loud that it almost covered Qi Long's voice.

"Mecha combat!" Ling Lan could immediately tell what the sound signified.

"Yes, and not just... BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!" Loud explosions rang out on Qi Long's end, "Boss, we need to retreat quickly, otherwise we'll be chopped into pieces by the winds of their swords."

Heavy panting could be heard via the communicator — it looked like Qi Long and the others were running for their lives trying to escape that frightening battlefield. Ling Lan was extremely anxious, hating the fact that she wasn't there with them.

"We can't go any further. Any further and it's the F-class savage beast area." Han Jijyun's voice rang out on the other side of the communicator.

"You all already entered the G-class savage beast area?" A bad feeling rose in Ling Lan's heart.

"Yup, the battlefield spread too quickly, so we could only keep dodging backwards. But luckily, those G-class savage beasts have also been frightened away by the battlefield." Qi Long's voice held a trace of relief, because if that had not been the case, they would not have been able to run so deep into the forest.

"Stop running. Those savage beasts have already become even more dangerous," said Ling Lan frantically.

The sound of running footsteps slowed and finally came to a stop. Then, Qi Long's voice came through once again, a note of puzzlement in it, "Boss Lan, what did you say?"

"They're about to go berserk from this sudden battle." Ling Lan had already received Little Four's warning. He had found that within the range of his monitoring, the savage beasts' eyes had already turned red, as if they were about to go berserk at any moment.

"Can you all go around the battlefield?" Ling Lan followed up with this question.

"No, the battlefield has already spread to cover the entire G-class savage beast district. No matter which way we go, we'll have to pass through F-class territory," responded Han Jijyun. He had been keeping a close eye on the situation, so he knew very well that right now, the battlefield had engulfed almost all of H-class and G-class areas. Therefore, if they wanted to avoid the battlefield and get back to the temporary outpost, they could only go through F-class savage beast territory.

Han Jijyun felt very helpless. With their capabilities, their chances of passing through F-class territory safely was exceedingly low — they would only have one chance in ten of surviving. It wasn't that much different from just cutting through the mecha battlefield directly.

"Boss, please don't worry. We'll act according to the situation. Right now, we'll first go look for a good place to hide. Boss, you should also go to an air raid shelter as soon as possible and hide." Qi Long told Ling Lan their decision. He knew that in this type of situation, even if Ling Lan was strong, he would not be able to help them.

In this kind of large-scale, destructive mecha battle, scout academy students like them who only knew low-level combat arts were just ants. Qi Long and the others did not want Ling Lan to be in any danger, even somewhat glad that he had not come with them to hunt and gotten stuck here as well.

"Alright, find a place as soon as possible to hide then. Oh, and keep your communicators turned on. I'll contact you guys periodically." After giving her orders, Ling Lan cut the call.

Ling Lan's brows were deeply furrowed. She knew very well that on that battlefield, the Federation mecha operators were fully engaged in battle and had no mind to care about the students anymore. In other words, whether Qi Long and the others lived or died was entirely up to their luck now.

"Goddammit! I need to find them!" Ling Lan made her decision in an instant. She was not someone who would abandon her comrades.

Ling Lan knew that if the battle continued to spread outwards, Qi Long and the others would be forced to enter the territory of even higher level savage beasts. Little Four had already cautioned more than once that the savage beasts there were already in a state of violent frenzy — their combat abilities were definitely not at their normal baseline. Undoubtedly, the longer Qi Long and the others lingered there, the more precarious their situation would be.

With a decision in her heart, Ling Lan quietly zipped out of the outpost. The soldier on guard at the entrance, who was waiting for straggling students, only felt his eyes blur for a moment, as if a shadow had flown by at the edge of his vision. But when he looked around, he saw nothing.

"Am I seeing things? Looks like the surrounding smoke still managed to affect my vision..." The soldier could only explain it this way. He threw all thoughts of that passing shadow to the back of his mind and stopped worrying about it.

Ling Lan rapidly dashed through the hunting grounds of the H-class savage beasts. In the dim lighting of the dense forest, she moved through the trees as nimbly as a monkey. With several quick dashes, she zipped from one tree branch to another. Her speed made her seem just like a shadow, leaving afterimages between the tree trunks, and her landings were so soft that they made no sound.

After travelling for about 2 kilometres, Ling Lan abruptly came to a stop. Her brows lifted slightly, but very quickly, she leapt up nimbly, and dashed into one of the shrubs to hide without making any noise.

Ling Lan had just hidden herself when, not far from Ling Lan's position, two large mecha collided heavily in the air and simultaneously lost control and fell.

They crashed forcefully into the forest undergrowth about 200 metres away from Ling Lan. The great tremors caused by the crashes stirred up a tornado, which whipped out

to decimate the surrounding trees. The tornado only died off when it was about less than 10 metres from where Ling Lan was hiding.

Ling Lan seemed to have expected this, for she was not affected at all. All throughout, she kept a lid on her presence, crouched within the shrubs, motionless. The instant she went into hiding, Ling Lan had entered hunting mode — her mind was as still as ice, perfectly melding her presence with her surroundings. Even if Instructor Number One from the learning space came here now, before Ling Lan made a move, it would still be very difficult for him to find Ling Lan's hiding spot.

Perhaps the two mecha had been rendered useless by the crash, for the operators could not get them to stand up again. Almost simultaneously, the hatch of the cockpit on both mecha opened. Two mecha operators leapt out from their respective cockpits at the same time.

"Clang!" The clear ring of cold weapons clashing, proving that the two mecha operators had crossed blades again in an instant.

The two of them were pushed back by the other's attack, each stumbling backwards several steps before regaining their footing. They gripped the short swords in their hands and faced each other from a distance, waiting for the next chance to attack.

The distance between the two of them was about 10 metres. The mecha operator dressed in a blue and white combat uniform on one side was from the Federation. Ling Lan could tell due to the Federation logo on his chest — a big golden five-pointed star. On the other side was the mecha operator of the Twilight Empire, dressed in a combat uniform the same black as the Empire's mecha. The entire uniform was a dark inky black, the only spot of colour being the blood-red sun on his chest.

The mecha operators' combat uniforms were a type of one-piece outfit, even coming outfitted with a fully sealed helmet. This set of combat uniforms were definitely the best defensive equipment in this world. Ordinary blades would not be able to pierce through it; of course, the short swords equipped on the bodies of these mecha operators were made of a special type of metal — although the swords could not pierce through the combat uniforms, three stabs at the same spot would weaken the uniform enough to penetrate it and deal damage.

The two of them faced off for a few seconds, unmoving, and then, their figures flashed as they moved almost simultaneously.

Clang! Clang! Clang!... Over 10 times the weapons clashed. The two men were fighting evenly, but the consecutive attacks were wearing down the stamina of both of them rapidly. Soon, the two men were starting to breathe unsteadily.

They had originally been fighting in their mecha for half a day up in the air, using up a lot of their energy already. And now, on the ground, they were engaged in a life-or-death close-range battle. Whether it was in terms of mental or physical strength, they were at the end of their ropes — it was all down to who could hold out for a breath longer.

The patiently waiting Ling Lan had already quietly picked up a twig about a finger-length and slipped it between her fingers, poised as she waited calmly for the two men to launch into their next attacks.

Finally, the two men lifted up their swords again, and charged towards the other at the same time...

Chance!

With barely a thought, Ling Lan's wrist twitched, and the twig in between her fingers flew like an arrow towards the Twilight Empire mecha operator.

Ling Lan naturally knew that the twig would not be able to penetrate the other's combat uniform on its own. Thus, her target was the only weakness of the combat uniform — the neck!

Even though, on the surface, it seemed like the mecha operator's entire body was shielded by the combat uniform, in truth, at times, from a particular angle, a tiny unshielded gap would be revealed. For example, when a mecha operator lifted his head a certain way, an almost imperceptible gap would appear at the join between the helmet and the combat uniform.

Ling Lan, who was lying flat within the shrubs, was viewing the scene from a downward angle, and so managed to catch sight of this tiny, tiny gap. All this time, Ling Lan's cool observation was so she could find this opportunity for a one-hit kill. And Ling Lan's patience finally brought her this opportunity.

The small and thin twig struck silently and abruptly — also, the Twilight Empire mecha operator never would have imagined that there would be another ruthless hunter here, so his full attention was on the Federation mecha operator opposite him.

He wasn't guarding against other sources of killing intent.

He suddenly felt a stab of pain at his neck, and the hand which he had planned to use to parry the opponent's short sword stilled for a moment.

But this short pause was enough to make him miss the correct timing to parry, and he could only watch as his chest was pierced forcefully by the other's short sword. Panicked, he tried to back away, but then he discovered something even more frightening — he could not control his body at all.

Within the blink of an eye, the opponent had stabbed his chest three times repeatedly, breaking through his uniform to pierce into his chest. He could only watch as his own blood started to spurt from his chest...

What in the world had happened? They had clearly been evenly matched, both unable to overwhelm the other... why would he lose control over his body in these final moments?

The mecha operator of the Twilight Empire fell over with a face filled with disbelief. Till the end, he still could not figure out how he had died, causing him to be a muddled ghost even in death.

Of course, the reason for all this was Ling Lan's undetectable attack; it had just been too strange and unexpected. Because the twig had been so small and thin, it had only caused a small droplet of blood to well up at the area on the neck which it had shot into. Thus, the Twilight Empire mecha operator had never even noticed that he had suffered a sneak attack.

Chapter 145

Controlling Polar Light!

The Federation mecha operator saw that his opponent was completely dead; only then did he let out a breath, relaxing fully. Similarly, he had not noticed anything odd, just feeling glad that the opponent had run out of stamina before he had. This was why he was the one who lived and not the opponent.

Hiding at one side, Ling Lan was just thinking whether to go out and meet the other to obtain an update on the battlefield situation when a frisson of alarm coursed through her heart. Without even thinking about it, Ling Lan pushed off the ground forcefully with both arms, sending her whole body flying backwards rapidly.

At that moment, a terrifying light energy beam poured down from the skies, accompanied by a horrified voice screaming, "Dodge...!!"

A Twilight mecha in the air had noticed the surviving Federation mecha operator on the ground, and had decisively raised the gun in his hand to send a powerful light beam blasting down on the other. Not too far from this spot, another Federation mecha had also happened to see the opponent's movement, and had tried to lift his own gun to stop the other, but it was too late.

The resting Federation mecha operator standing there had no chance of reacting, directly being engulfed by that massive light beam...

A loud "BOOM" and the earth was blasted apart, causing an approximately 20-metre wide pit to appear. Right then, that Federation mecha operator standing there had disappeared without a trace, only leaving behind blood-soaked dark rust coloured earth as proof of his existence.

"Bastards! I'll kill you!" The other Federation mecha operator's anguished voice rang out, interspersed with countless blasts from his gun.

In the air, yet another pair of Federation and Twilight Empire mecha became locked in battle, outcome uncertain.

Less than 10 metres away from the deep pit, Ling Lan was lying flat on the ground, drenched in cold sweat, not daring to make a single move. Luckily she had sensed the danger back then and had run away in time. Otherwise, if she had still been hiding in her original spot, that hit just now would have turned her into a puddle of bloody water just like that Federation mecha operator.

Even so, she had still been struck heavily by a broken tree which had been thrown her way by the blast, incurring some internal damage. Ling Lan knew very well that in this kind of grand mecha battle, fragile physical bodies just could not stand up to the potential damage. She was already considered unbelievably lucky for surviving this round.

"Boss, the mecha discarded by those two earlier may perhaps still be usable." Right now, Little Four was also very nervous. Ling Lan was stuck on her own on the battlefield — this situation was just too dangerous. They needed to have a mecha of their own to be able to stand up to the enemy. After searching for a long while, Little Four had found that the mecha which had fallen at the very start of this still seemed somewhat intact, so there was a chance it could still be used.

"Let's wait for a moment. Let those two mecha leave first." Ling Lan circulated her Qi to start healing her injuries as she consoled Little Four.

By now, there was nothing but flat ground around those two mecha which had fallen, no available cover whatsoever. If she just rushed out like this, she would definitely be noticed by the two mecha battling it out in the sky. Ling Lan absolutely did not want to be like that Federation mecha operator earlier — consumed by fire, saying a thorough goodbye to the world, leaving no trace behind.

Little Four knew that Ling Lan was right, and so said nothing further. However, the notion of getting a mecha of their own once again reared up in his heart. That way, he would be able to control the A.I. of the mecha and help his boss.

Ling Lan's internal injury was not too severe, but if not treated well, there would still be the possibility of future problems. Especially since they were still in a dangerous position right now — any damage would mean a decrease in combat ability, so the most important thing now was to make sure her injury was fully healed.

Consequently, Ling Lan left the safety of her surroundings up to Little Four, putting her full attention into recuperating. Very quickly, Ling Lan shut out all thoughts of her surroundings, entering a deeper dimension of Qi circulation and healing...

When Ling Lan opened her eyes once more, her body felt light — the tired feeling in her muscles as she had rushed here was gone along with her injury. Ling Lan knew that this was due to the deeper level of Qi healing, replenishing the vital energies of her body till its optimum state.

Ling Lan's spirits were light as she looked up subconsciously. There was nothing there — the two mecha fighting there before she began healing herself were gone. Frowning lightly, Ling Lan asked, "*Little Four, why didn't you wake me?*" Who knew how much time she had wasted — if she had known that those two mecha were gone, she would have woken up earlier.

Little Four did not think he did anything wrong. Righteously, he said, "*You need to be well so we can find Qi Long and the others more efficiently.*"

Ling Lan had nothing to say in response to Little Four's words. After all, Little Four had done so for her sake. If she did not heal her injuries fully and forced herself to go and look for her companions, and then, if by any chance there was any danger, she may have dropped the ball at a critical point. That was definitely being irresponsible.

Thus, Ling Lan cast aside the issue and began sneaking cautiously towards the two fallen mecha. As she moved, she asked Little Four, "*When did those two mecha leave?*"

"Hmm? They never left..." For a moment, Little Four had no idea what Ling Lan was saying.

"Then where are they?" Little Four's words scared Ling Lan so much that she immediately dropped flat to the ground and stopped moving. Could it be that the two mecha were hiding in some unseen corner? Why didn't this little rascal tell her about this sooner?

"Oh, they're just laying about 1000 metres away." Little Four's words let Ling Lan's heart settle back in her ribcage.

Little Four brought up the image of the scene 1000 metres away in front of Ling Lan's

eyes. Through it, Ling Lan could see that the two mecha had apparently perished together. 1000 metres away, there was yet another deep pit, and at the bottom of it, the two mecha were tangled up with one another. The beam sabers in the hands of both mecha were deeply buried in the other's cockpit. Thick crimson liquid was gushing out endlessly from both cockpits — the mecha operators inside were extremely unlikely to have survived.

"Little Four, monitor the surroundings, including the area above," ordered Ling Lan, after letting out a heavy sigh. Almost every second on the battlefield, a life was ended. Ling Lan hoped she did not become the next to perish. Thus, she needed to get a handle on the surrounding situation so that she would not be caught off guard by an enemy hiding in a corner.

Under Little Four's comprehensive monitoring, Ling Lan safely arrived at her destination. Little Four swiftly checked the two mecha and found that they were both viable for repair. After some consideration, Ling Lan decided to take control of the Federation mecha. Although she also considered using the Twilight Empire mecha to sneak into the ranks of the Twilight Empire and attack them from within, the battlefield was a chaotic mess — both sides were already in a battle frenzy, if she were accidentally killed by the Federation, that would be such an ironic waste.

Ling Lan quickly climbed into the cockpit, and Little Four instantly took over the control rights of the A.I... Then, the first thing he did was to urgently shut the cockpit hatch, and then activate the mecha.

The mecha's screen lit up in a flash, and then countless combinations of 0s and 1s appeared, scrolling up in an endless stream from the bottom of the screen, finally covering the entire screen...

"Boss, please wait patiently. I'm upgrading the A.I. and repairing some of the broken driver routines." Little Four's voice suddenly came out from the mecha's sound systems.

Ling Lan waited for roughly 3 minutes, and the countless 0s and 1s finally disappeared from the screen, condensing down to form two large words — Polar Light¹!

After a brief moment, the two words slowly faded from the screen. At the same time, the screen brightened, and Ling Lan felt the enclosed feeling she had at the start fade away. She could now see the limitless blue skies, and several columns of black smoke

drifting over from who knows where.

"This mecha is part of the advanced mecha Polar Light series." Seeing the words 'Polar Light', Ling Lan immediately knew what level of mecha she was about to operate. Who'd have guessed that her first time piloting a real mecha would directly skip basic mecha, lower mecha, and intermediate mecha, jumping straight to advanced mecha? Other children probably wouldn't even dare to dream of such a thing. *"As expected, anything is possible on a battlefield!"* thought Ling Lan to herself.

"The Polar Light series — its strengths are its speed and its long-range attacks. In contrast, it's a bit weaker in terms of close-range combat," said Little Four regretfully. It should be noted that whether in terms of physical skills or mecha control, Ling Lan's skills in close-range combat were much stronger than her long-range attacks.

"Little Four, there's no such thing as strengths and weaknesses for mecha. Whether it's strong or weak depends entirely on the ability of the operator." A small smile hung on the corners of Ling Lan's lips. Even if this was the weakest mecha, when it came to close-range combat, she had the confidence to utilise it well.

"Also, I've found the instructional channel for the Polar Light controls. Boss, do you want to view it?" This was an advanced mecha after all, some of its controls were somewhat different from those of a basic mecha.

"Okay, just speed it up." Ling Lan had already scanned the control buttons — most of it was almost the same as with basic mecha controls, with only a few new additions. What Ling Lan was interested in was this section of the video.

Very quickly, Ling Lan had absorbed the newly added things. There was nothing too strange about them, mostly just the launch buttons of some artillery weapons. Ling Lan wasn't someone who used those much anyway, so this just made Ling Lan even more confident.

"What a shame that other than two small high-frequency blades and a beam saber, this mecha has no other close-range weaponry." Little Four was full of contempt for the dullness of the high-frequency blades and the sole piercing function of the beam saber.

"They're enough for me." Ling Lan nimbly controlled the mecha to grip the beam saber in its left hand. That length and piercing function really made it feel like a tri-edge trench knife; Ling Lan was very pleased.

"Little Four, run an immediate check on the remaining artillery left and the power levels." Ling Lan was not an impulsive person. Everything she did, she hoped to do it with all the information at her disposal.

"Head: anti-aircraft missiles ², 2. Left arm: Beam shield energy sufficient, able to support 2 hours of continuous combat. Beam saber energy insufficient, only able to sustain for around 40 minutes. Right arm: 57 mm high-energy beam rifle, able to fire 18 beam shots. Additionally, in the chest area, two inlaid rockets were still unused. Driver energy blocks: Main energy block with 20% remaining, two secondary energy blocks still left unused." Little Four reported the status items of the mecha to Ling Lan one by one.

"If we fly, how long can we sustain movement? If I fight at full strength, how long can the mecha hold out?" Ling Lan then threw a few possible scenarios at Little Four.

"Purely flying, we'll be fine within 10 hours. If you combine flight with full out combat, 30 minutes should be okay!" replied Little Four conclusively.

"Got it." Ling Lan now had a baseline. She then operated the mecha to fly swiftly at low altitudes, rapidly making her way towards Qi Long and the others. Ling Lan was not flying at max speeds, however, because she did not want to be noticed and targeted by the enemies in the air above...

Chapter 146

Discovered?

In a dark and dense forest area closest to the battlefield, a team of four scout students were carefully moving through the trees, trying to go around the whole battlefield by skirting the edges of the forest...

They could clearly hear the violent sounds of artillery and explosions not far away, and every once in a while, they could feel the sudden tremors of the ground when a mecha crashed from the skies into the ground. Each time, they would be frozen in terror, afraid that some stray artillery or even mecha would just fall directly on them.

"You guys, still okay?" Qi Long swiped off the sweat on his forehead, and turned back to ask his teammates behind him.

"Don't worry about us. Right now, the most important thing is to not go the wrong way." Han Jijyun's brows were furrowed as he continued to keep track of their coordinates. Due to the spreading of the battle, they were getting closer and closer to the active territory of the F-class savage beasts. Even if they had not received Ling Lan's warning, they could feel the chill from within their bones — the situation was already getting worse and worse.

The few of them once again made their way carefully through the forest. After a distance, Qi Long, who was in the lead, abruptly waved his hand. The boys behind him immediately dashed away to hide in the bushes or behind trees, beam handguns in their hands. If an F-class savage beast appeared, they would pull the triggers without hesitation — taking the initiative would give them the upper hand.

Qi Long alone was left in a half crouch, his beam gun pointed right at the spot which he had found suspicious. Sweat dripped down his forehead to glide down his cheek. He did not dare to lose his concentration — an F-class savage beast was equivalent to a human at the Refinement stage; this wasn't something he, as someone who had barely stepped into the Refinement stage, could match up to. He had already thought things through. If an F-class savage beast actually appeared, even at the cost of his life he would create an opportunity for his teammates to escape.

"Qi Long?" A deep and hoarse voice came from behind the shifting shrub.

"Wu Jiong, it's you." Qi Long relaxed instantly, almost dropping bonelessly to the ground. He had really been too nervous before this.

Hearing the two of them speak, Lin Zhong-qing and Luo Lang were about to come out of hiding when Han Jijyun, who was covering Qi Long's back, signalled them to watch and wait. The two of them instantly put up their guard again, gripping their guns tightly as they continued to remain hidden.

Wu Jiong finally climbed out from the bush. His protective vest was a little damaged, and there was an open wound on his cheek. After Wu Jiong came out, his teammates Ye Xu, Qin Yi, and the others also revealed themselves, walking out from various corners. One of them was being supported by Qin Yi. The lot of them were all in roughly the same condition as Wu Jiong, extremely dishevelled.

Wu Jiong saw that Qi Long was alone, and his expression shifted slightly. "Where are your teammates? And where's Ling Lan?"

Qi Long answered, "They're here." He turned to wave behind him, and Han Jijyun and the others walked over.

Then, Qi Long said, "Boss Lan is at the temporary outpost. There's only the four of us here." He pointed at Wu Jiong and asked, "How did you all become like this?"

Wu Jiong grimly spat out a gob of spittle. "Pah! Our luck was just too bloody terrible. A bomb blew up not too far from where we were hiding. Luckily, we had hidden behind a large thousand year old tree, so the tree blocked most of the explosion. But still, being the closest to the explosion, Chen Yu was heavily injured. It's lucky we had enough emergency healing agents on hand, otherwise Chen Yu would have really been in danger. Now, at least he's alive."

Chen Yu was the Class-A student who had temporarily joined Wu Jiong's team for this hunting period. His results in class had always been average, and he was normally extremely untalkative, and so was very easily overlooked by others. But for some reason, Wu Jiong had chosen him at first glance...

"Do you have enough medical agents? We still have some here." Qi Long asked in concern. Hearing Qi Long mention this, Han Jijyun hurriedly took off his backpack, prepared to take out some first aid agents.

"Thank you, but that's not necessary for now. Chen Yu's injuries are stable, but to heal it as soon as possible, we need to get back to the outpost immediately to get him into a recovery pod." Wu Jiong declined Qi Long's offer, but his complexion did not look any better. This was because they needed to get through the battlefield as quickly as they could to get Chen Yu back to the outpost for treatment, or else his injuries might get worse if left untreated for too long and end up giving him trouble in the future.

But how they could pass through the battlefield was a huge problem. At this moment, he truly hated how helpless he was.

He lifted his head to look at Qi Long and said, "We're preparing to go back to the outpost as soon as possible to get treatment for Chen Yu. What are you guys planning?"

"We also plan to do the same," replied Qi Long, "Boss just contacted us, saying that the savage beasts here are about to go berserk. The longer we stay here, the more dangerous it'll be."

"Cutting through the battlefield is impossible. The two sides are fighting too fiercely. The artillery is flying everywhere — no one knows whether they'll hit us," said Wu Jiong.

"Not just that. If any enemy sees us, they would also shoot a beam projectile at us without mercy. They've always been passionate about getting rid of us so-called 'promising seeds'," added Han Jijyun, mockingly.

"Hn, so we can only stick to the forest and go around the battlefield this way," Qi Long told Wu Jiong their original plan.

"Just as I thought." Wu Jiong had the same plan as well.

"Still, it's just as dangerous. We're basically rubbing the edges of the F-class savage beast territory as we travel. If we happen to meet an F-class savage beast, we'll be wiped out," cautioned Han Jijyun.

"Dammit. Staying here is not an option, we might as well try our luck," muttered Ye Xu in frustration.

"Agreed!" The others all chimed in as well. They were the genius students of the Central Scout Academy, the cream of the crop — from youth, their education had always taught them to face trouble head-on and create chances for themselves. They

were certainly not people who would just do nothing and wait for death.

The two teams were in agreement. In fact, Luo Lang and Lin Zhong-qing even helped Ye Xu, Qin Yi, and the others by taking their backpacks so that they could care for Chen Yu better. This cooperation helped the two teams move a little faster.

Right then, Qi Long suddenly signalled for everyone to stop. Under Wu Jiong's suspicious gaze, Qi Long excitedly took a call on his communicator. "Boss, how did you manage to contact us?"

Not long after the battle started, the communicators had lost the communication function. Qi Long and the others knew that this was due to the fighting. The camp control tower was afraid that the enemy would hack their signals and so had chosen to cut satellite transmissions. But surprisingly, even under these circumstances, Ling Lan still managed to contact them. This was absolutely freaktastic!

And so, in Qi Long's mind, Boss Ling Lan's image just became even more impressive.

Hearing Qi Long's question, Ling Lan knew that this was all thanks to Little Four. Still, Ling Lan did not explain herself. After simply asking Qi Long for their current coordinates, she told Qi Long that she was on her way over. If they were not in any danger, they should stay as close as possible to the coordinates they gave until she got there.

Hanging up his communicator, Qi Long's face once again revealed his trademark wide-toothed grin, adding some goofiness to his demeanour. However, everyone present knew that this was just Qi Long's facade — he had never been silly when he needed to be astute.

"Good news?" Wu Jiong asked, seeing Qi Long in such a great mood after answering the call.

"Yup. My boss will be here soon," said Qi Long gleefully. Hehe, it was truly great to have a boss. Even if the sky fell, there was someone to hold it up.

"It's too dangerous! What can he do even if he comes?" Han Jijyun's first reaction was to object, feeling that Ling Lan must have gone mad. He felt that this was not an action Ling Lan should take — this was definitely not the choice of a rational type leader. Still, it could not be denied that a tendril of warmth was spreading through his heart, and his initially flagging spirits suddenly lifted significantly.

"Brothers united, we can even cut through gold¹! With Boss leading us, I have nothing to fear... Also, Boss said that he's already at G-class territory, heading here." Qi Long did not have as many considerations as Han Jijyun — he just felt that with everyone together, he would even be willing to venture into a dragon's lair or a tiger's den.

"That's great! Since Boss is coming, then let's just wait here," said Luo Lang, equally excited. At the same time, he had noticed that a large part of Han Jijyun and Lin Zhong-qing's stamina had been used up during this forced march. It was just that they were in a hurry to get back, and was surrounded by danger, so they hadn't dared to stop and rest.

Qi Long looked at Wu Jiong, and Wu Jiong looked at the tired faces of all his team members. He felt that it was indeed about time to get some rest, so he nodded and said, "Let's rest for a moment."

The two teams found a relatively secluded spot, and with Qi Long and Wu Jiong as sentry on each side, the others huddled together in the middle and began consuming the compressed biscuits and nutrient solutions they had on them.

Very quickly, they had eaten their fill and rested. If it were not for the sounds of explosions and mecha fighting not too far from them, they could almost believe that the battle had just been a bad dream.

"Not good! Hide!" Wu Jiong and Qi Long shouted almost simultaneously.

The two teams reacted quickly. They immediately threw down the food in their hands, all of them moving to the respective nearest cover to hide.

At that moment, a blue and white mecha fell from the sky, crashing forcefully into the forest about 100 metres from them. In an instant, the area had become a large pit, trees fallen with broken branches scattered everywhere.

Three powerful energy beams immediately followed, striking the cockpit of the mecha with precision. The cockpit was devoured by the beams instantly, melting away to become a gaping hole.

Three black Twilight Empire mecha lowered their beam cannons in unison. "Seeking death idiot²!" sneered one of the mecha operators gleefully.

Honestly, this Federation mecha which had been destroyed was really very unlucky.

He had been on his way back to restock on ammunition, but had unexpectedly stumbled upon this three-man team of Twilight Empire mecha. Although he had tried his best to escape, he still did not manage to evade their combined attack in the end and was killed.

"Stop dithering. Our brave warriors are fighting courageously. We need to find the enemy command centre as soon as possible and carry out Operation Decapitation. The earlier we finish, the more brave warriors we can save." One of the other mecha seemed to be the squad leader of the three-man team. The moment he said this, the other two mecha immediately responded respectfully, "Hai!"

Just as the three men were about to pilot their mecha away, one of the mecha seemed to spot something as he zoomed out his screen. "Eh? What that could be ³?"

"Kotou-kun? Did you find something?" The small team leader was startled by his subordinate's cry of surprise, and quickly asked him to report.

"Hehe, no worries. I just found some fun little mice." The mecha operator called Kotou-kun suddenly let out a burst of maniacal laughter, somewhat excited and perverse.

Chapter 147

Ace Operator?

At that moment, the squad leader also caught sight of the few 'little mice' that Kotou had noticed. He knew of his subordinate's little penchant, and so grumbled at him good-naturedly, "I'll give you one minute to deal with these little mice. Shikamaru-kun, let's go."

The squad leader could leave so easily because he did not think that these few little mice would be any trouble for Kotou, so there was no need for all three of them to be there. Might as well let Kotou enjoy himself.

The two of them very quickly sped off in their mecha, leaving Kotou behind alone. When they left, they did not notice that from another direction, close to the ground, a white and blue mecha was skimming its way towards the area...

Kotou controlled his mecha to lock onto the group below him. From a distance, he raised his mecha's right arm, aiming his beam gun right at the people staring at him fearfully from below.

Qi Long, Wu Jiong, and the others naturally knew they had been discovered by the other. Their faces paled, and they shouted desperately for their comrades to run... but in fact, they knew deep down that no matter how fast they ran, they would not be able to outrun the impact of the mecha's beam gun.

"Wakaka! Pitiful worms, say farewell to the world just like this!" Kotou saw the terrified faces of the children below and began to laugh wildly in excitement. This was the type of expression that excited him! It was like the high from taking drugs — irresistible... this was also the reason why he had always loved torturing and killing children.

With this twisted mentality and a crazed smile, Kotou decisively pressed down on the launch button in his hand. Energy began to gather at the muzzle of his beam gun, about to burst forth at any moment...

A loud "Boom!"

From a distance, a beam struck his mecha's beam gun before he could shoot. Because of this beam, the beam gun exploded instantly, blowing off the whole right arm of Kotou's mecha. The arm dropped to the ground below.

"Federation mecha!" Qi Long, Wu Jiong, and the others had thought they were doomed, but unexpectedly, they were saved at the last second. They all turned to look for the source of the beam, and saw a blue and white mecha flying swiftly from a distance, heading straight for the Twilight Empire mecha in the air.

"That's great! We're saved!" There was an expression of great relief on all the children's faces.

Han Jijyun was the only one who was still somewhat level-headed. "Take advantage of this chance and run!" There had been three Twilight mecha, while only one Federation mecha was coming here. If the other two Twilight mecha hurried back, Han Jijyun did not think the Federation mecha had good odds of surviving. The mecha had saved them, so Han Jijyun also did not want him to die, but reality forced Han Jijyun to first prioritize their own survival.

Qi Long and the others knew Han Jijyun was right; they cast a reluctant look at the blue and white mecha, and then gathered everyone and moved deeper into the forest...

"Good luck, Federation mecha operator!" Everyone was silently cheering on the Federation mecha operator in the sky.

"Baka!" Kotou was livid. He had only wanted have some fun and kill off a few mice, but just a slip in attention had allowed the opponent to blast off his mecha's right arm, losing him his beam gun.

He glared hatefully at that incoming blue and white mecha. It was a standard advanced mecha, with only the Federation's logo on its chest, nothing else. From this, he could tell that the other was just a regular advanced mecha warrior.

In the Federation, mecha of ace level and above would have their own personal symbol on the chest other than the Federation's logo. The higher one's level, the larger one's personal symbol would be. When one became a god-class operator, the Federation logo would no longer be displayed, leaving only one's unique personal symbol behind. Take Ling Xiao for example. On the chest area of his mecha, there had only been a fiery phoenix on display.

His initial plan to contact his squad leader abruptly stopped... he had really been thinking of calling his squad leader over, but seeing that the opponent was just a regular advanced mecha warrior, his pride would not allow him to press the connect button.

If he had to call for help against this kind of opponent, it would truly be a disgrace.

Kotou felt that he could not afford to lose this face — he was the elite of the Empire, an ace operator — how could he lose to a common advanced mecha warrior of the enemy nation?

Kotou decided in an instant that he would avenge himself. Even if he only had his left arm remaining, with his control skills, it was enough to torment the opponent till the other yearned for death.

Kotou controlled the mecha's left arm to pull out the beam saber behind its back, in preparation for close-range combat.

"Boss, the opponent is actually choosing to engage in close-range combat!" Little Four was thrilled. Compared to long-range attack, Little Four had much more confidence in Ling Lan's close-range combat.

"That's pretty good luck. Little Four, engage full horsepower, charge!" Ling Lan commanded decisively.

Initially, she had been controlling her speed, wary of the other sniping at her mecha. Thus, she had been fully focused, ready to push her mecha into irregular flight. This decision of the opponent actually eased her mind greatly. Mind you, irregular flight was very taxing mentally, and was also a high-level movement that Ling Lan only learned recently. If forced to use it, Ling Lan would have only been able to do her best despite her average proficiency with it.

"Got it, Boss. Leave it to me." Little Four's reply was accompanied by a burst in speed.

Kotou had thought that he would have some time to adjust, but unexpectedly, the opponent's speed suddenly increased by several folds, and the opponent appeared before him in the blink of an eye. Even worse, the other did not seem to have any intentions of slowing down, instead choosing to barrel straight at him, as if determined to bring him down and perish together.

Kotou naturally did not want to die together with the opponent. His first reaction was to dodge — he activated the emergency thruster on one side, forcibly shifting his mecha to a side, narrowly missing the other's charge.

But before Kotou could relax, the blue and white mecha about to pass by suddenly stopped strangely. At the same time, its mechanical arm bent and pushed out savagely. The crook of the black mecha's neck was struck by a forceful elbow.

A loud "Bang!" This strength behind this elbow was considerable. It immediately sent the black mecha spinning, and the initially air-borne mecha began plunging towards the ground...

"Goddammit!" A moment of negligence made him lose the initiative and take on the passive role in this fight. Kotou tried desperately to regain control of his mecha, hoping to slow the speed of his descent and recover the mecha's balance to counterattack.

He finally managed to stop his mecha's descent with much difficulty, but the blue and white mecha did not stop attacking with just that elbow. The opponent actually descended as well, flying upside down to meet him head first, sending an iron fist hurtling his way.

This attack once again disrupted the mecha's balance. The mecha dropped sharply, and just when Kotou was trying his hardest to pull up his mecha, he was flabbergasted to find that the opponent's blue and white mecha was falling even faster than him, actually overtaking him in an instant.

This was all because the blue and white mecha had engaged both main thrusters at the same time, boosting its speed so the mecha could descend faster...

Qi Long and the others, who had just run away to a safe distance, were hiding and watching the battle. Seeing this development, their hearts jumped into their throat. Could it be that there was something wrong with the Federation mecha's systems? Or did the mecha operator make an operation mistake?

The blue and white mecha was about to smash into the ground when — barely 2 metres from the ground, the mecha's thus far inert secondary engine for reactionary propulsion activated, its 12 jet spouts all opening up. A powerful surge of air blasted out, actually blowing the leaves and broken branches on the ground into the air, twirling on the whirling winds.

This blast of energy was enough to stop the falling mecha cold. At the same time, the blue and white mecha's two mechanical arms lifted high above its head, all ten fingers spread wide, and slammed heavily onto the ground. Meanwhile, in the air, its two legs spun fiercely, kicking out towards the spot where the black mecha was about to fall into.

And so, a mecha spun gracefully into an intermediate difficulty Thomas flair¹, kicking the black mecha back up into the air. This time, due to this large force, the black mecha no longer had any way to deflect, and was sent flying by the blue and white mecha's kick.

"Amazing!" Qi Long and the others were utterly stunned by this sight. They had not expected that a mecha could pull off human combat arts, and it was even more impressive and exciting than seeing a real person pull it off.

The blue and white mecha pushed off its hands and flipped to stand upright. Without hesitation, it used its left hand to pull out the beam saber on its back, while its right hand grabbed the high-frequency blade on its thigh, and pounced ruthlessly at the black mecha who had hit the ground and was now lying there immobile.

"Argh, baka, die die die!" Kotou shook his concussed head. Seeing the blue and white mecha rushing at him with its blades, he immediately fired all the artillery he could on his body to try and stop the other. Perhaps out of fear, he actually began cursing vehemently within the cockpit.

Facing the black mecha's barrage of fire, the blue and white mecha's rushing figure suddenly started folding and overlapping, even creating multiple layers of ghost images... The artillery all landed around the blue and white mecha, releasing countless light and flames, but not a single one hit the mecha.

"Isn't that the irregular flicker that only ace operators would know?" asked Wu Jiong, astonished.

Qi Long nodded excitedly. "Yes, yes, it is! The one controlling that mecha must definitely be an ace operator!"

Qi Long was currently looking at the formidable blue and white mecha with a face full of admiration. He wished that he could be the one piloting that mecha... The desire in his heart was raging: *I want to operate mecha, operate mecha* (several hundred

thousand more 'operate mecha's omitted)...

"Impossible, how could it be irregular flicker..." When Kotou saw this, his eyes popped wide open in disbelief. A wave of regret crashed into his heart — he felt as if he had been tricked...

"Despicable chinks ²!" In his final moments, he reflexively pressed the button to connect to his squad leader. But it was too late. The blue and white mecha's beam saber stabbed viciously into his cockpit. The immense beam energy immediately destroyed his upper body, leaving the cockpit filled with blood.

The squad leader, already 3 kilometres away, saw Kotou's communication request, and hurriedly accepted. "Kotou-kun? Kotou-kun?"

The other end was silent, but for the strange sound of dripping water...

"Not good, something happened to Kotou-kun! Let's go back!" The squad leader had a bad feeling about this. He instantly made his decision, calling for another team member to go back with him to check out the situation.

Chapter 148

Number X...

Ling Lan resolutely ignored her discomfort; she gritted her teeth and controlled the mecha to pull out its beam saber from the Twilight mecha's cockpit.

Ling Lan's discomfort was not because this was her first kill in real life, but because her current small body found it a little hard to bear the reaction force from operating mecha.

Little Four noticed Ling Lan's condition and understanding the reason behind it, he asked her anxiously, "Boss, are you alright?"

Little Four knew that operating mecha would definitely cause reaction force to reflect back on the operator's body. He had already done his best to lower the reaction force incurred to the minimum, hoping that his boss would not be harmed by it.

However, Little Four never expected that Ling Lan would perform so outstandingly for her very first time operating real mecha. In particular, those final movements to evade the artillery had been beyond her usual standards — evolving the irregular dash of advanced mecha operators straight to the irregular flicker only ace operators were capable of.

The irregular dash and the irregular flicker were actually the same skill. The reason there were two names for it, was that depending on the operator's skill proficiency, the resulting effect was visibly different.

The irregular dash was an advanced mecha control technique, one of the compulsory techniques advanced mecha warriors and special-class mecha operators must learn. On the other hand, irregular flicker was a skill exclusive to ace operators. In other words, only an ace operator would be able to execute irregular flicker perfectly.

This was also why Qi Long and Wu Jiong would mistake Ling Lan for an ace operator. Frankly, Ling Lan's current control capabilities were only at the level of an advanced mecha warrior. At most, she could be said to have stepped half a foot into the ranks of special-class mecha operators.

Without a doubt, the appearance of the irregular flicker was the result of an accidental cross-limits burst of skill.

Of course, this cross-stage display of skill had also dealt heavy damage to Ling Lan's body. Although Little Four had already tried his best to minimize the damage, Ling Lan's body had still incurred a certain degree of damage.

"I'm fine. I've been through worse pain than this. This is nothing," Ling Lan reassured Little Four. Even though her complexion was so pale that it was worrying, her spirits were still at regular levels; it was as if the pain of her body did not exist.

Honestly, from the moment she had decided to pilot the mecha, she was already mentally prepared to get hurt. Mind you, for a child not yet 13 years old, no matter how solidly built the child was, their bones just could not handle the feedback force from operating mecha. This was also one of the reasons why the Federation banned children below 13 years old from learning how to operate mecha.

Of course, Ling Lan's reassurance to Little Four was also the truth. This little bit of pain she felt now was nothing compared to the excruciating pain of her illness from her previous life. In comparison, the pain she felt now was not even worth mentioning.

"Besides, Little Four, you've already helped me neutralize most of the reaction force, protecting me well. So I'm fine. Thank you, Little Four!" Ling Lan thanked Little Four sincerely for his hard work. If not for him, her body might be in even worse condition.

"Boss, I definitely won't fall for your candy-wrapped missiles..." Little Four was beaming, a smile blooming on his face, stretching from ear to ear. Still, he did not forget to clarify his stance. As a principled intelligent entity, how could he be so easily bought?

Ling Lan ignored the currently tsundere Little Four, quickly scanning her surroundings instead. Very quickly, she had found Qi Long and the others' hiding place. Seeing the lot of them unharmed, she instantly relaxed.

Ling Lan efficiently hung the mecha's beam saber back on its back and slipped the high-frequency blade back into its place at the mecha's outer thigh. Just as she was thinking to go greet Qi Long and the others, Little Four's expression suddenly tightened and he warned, "Boss, the two Twilight mecha who left earlier are coming back. They're about 2 kilometres away from us."

Ling Lan felt a weight settle in her heart at these words. Although she already knew this was a possibility, finding out that the opponent was really coming still made her a little nervous.

"Hide properly. Don't come out!" Ling Lan threw down these words and purposefully flew the mecha in another direction, preparing to distance herself from this area. Ling Lan did not want the following battle to hurt Qi Long and the others, otherwise her coming here to aid them would be meaningless.

Qi Long and the others hiding in the dense forest heard a cold voice ring out by their ears. They were startled, and dispelled all thoughts of climbing out from their hiding place. They laid flat in their respective hiding places, not daring to make any movement.

"It's the Twilight mecha. The two mecha who left earlier have returned. Everyone make sure to stay hidden!" Wu Jiong's hiding spot happened to allow him to see the mecha flying swiftly by in the skies above. He immediately hissed out a warning. Qi Long and the others now knew why the Federation mecha had warned them not to move before flying off.

"He's trying to save us by drawing those two mecha away?" There was a complicated expression on Lin Zhong-qing's face; it was a combination of gratitude and respect, and also a trace of bewilderment.

"He's an ace mecha operator, he'll definitely be able to defeat those two mecha." Luo Lang clenched his fists, trying to convince himself while convincing Lin Zhong-qing at the same time.

"Will he? Don't tell me you didn't see the numbers on the arms of those three mecha." Ye Xu's spirits were low. As children within a militant system, they were well-informed about their own nation's and their enemy nations' mecha details. (At least, they knew more than the time-travelling outsider Ling Lan.)

Ye Xu's words caused everyone to fall silent. Only Lin Zhong-qing remained confused; he looked at Qi Long and then Han Jijyun, hoping that they would explain things for him. As a poor commoner, he did not really know much about this military information.

However, the typically talkative and outgoing Qi Long was uncharacteristically pensive

and uncommunicative. His face revealed his puzzlement as he thought deeply about something. Han Jijyun cast a confused look at him, but found that Qi Long's attention wasn't here at all. So, he took over to explain, "The Twilight mecha operators' levels can be determined by the serial number on their arms. Those few mecha earlier all had an 'X' at the beginning of their serial numbers. That means they're from an ace mecha team!"

"Ace?" Lin Zhong-qing caught hold of the key point.

Han Jijyun smiled bitterly and nodded. With that, Lin Zhong-qing understood, and his face drained of all colour...

Would their saviour lose his wings ¹ here? The children's hearts grew heavy with worry.

"Squad leader, I've found Kotou-kun's mecha. There's a large hole in Kotou-kun's cockpit. Looks like it's been shattered. From my observations, this should be the result of a stab by a mecha's beam saber..." Mecha operator Shikamaru discovered the area Kotou-kun had perished on his scanner. The zoomed-in pictures his camera picked up was very clear; it was very obvious how his teammate had died.

"Baka-yarou ²!" A vein popped out on the squad leader's forehead as he gritted his teeth and cursed. He was irritated that someone had actually managed to kill his subordinate right under his nose. This made him feel extremely humiliated.

"Squad leader, there's a mecha over there... it's Federation." Mecha operator Shikamaru had already widened his search range, and soon picked up the low-flying Ling Lan on his radar.

"That fellow must be the one who killed Kotou-kun. We must kill him to wash away our disgrace. After him!" Livid, the squad leader immediately turned and set his mecha on the path towards that mecha. Behind him, Shikamaru reacted swiftly, hurriedly following with his mecha.

Ling Lan's mecha was not flying in a concealed manner, and its speed was not very fast either. She was doing this intentionally so those two mecha would chase her and get further away from the hiding place of Qi Long and the others. Ling Lan knew very well that she would have to risk her life to fight against two ace mecha. During that time,

she wouldn't be able to spare any mind for the surrounding situation. To avoid harming Qi Long and the others by accident, the further she could get away from them, the better.

The image Little Four transmitted to her let Ling Lan know that the two mecha were following her as she had hoped. Then, Ling Lan abruptly increased her speed by many times. The two main engines of the mecha roared in unison, and the mecha drew a lightning-quick line through the air, flying over 1000 metres in an instant.

"Shikamaru-kun, speed up. The opponent has noticed us." The squad leader saw the Federation mecha trying to escape and knew that the other had noticed them on his tail.

"Hai!" The two Twilight mecha increased their speed at the same time, and like two feral dogs locked on Ling Lan's scent, they chased after her.

As Ling Lan was controlling her movement speed, not pushing her mecha to its limits, after around 10 seconds, the enemy had already caught up to her.

"Shikamaru-kun, high altitude snipe." Once Ling Lan entered sniping range, the squad leader immediately gave the order. He dearly wished that his subordinate would be able to destroy that hateful mecha operator with one shot.

"Hai!" The mecha operator Shikamaru was a sniping expert to begin with. He controlled his mecha to fly steadily and lifted the sniping rifle in his mecha's hands. The moment he managed to lock onto Ling Lan flying in front of him, he pressed the firing button.

"Boss, we've been targeted." The opponent had just locked onto Ling Lan's mecha when Little Four issued a warning.

Ling Lan's fingers danced frenetically — very quickly, sweat began to bead up on her forehead and the tip of her nose, condensing to slide down her face and drop...

Her mecha was suddenly seen to wriggle like a fish in water, drawing a strange curve, allowing it to dodge Shikamaru's shot by a narrow margin!

"Irregular flight! Damn it!" Mecha operator Shikamaru was extremely put out for missing his target. He also knew how to execute irregular flight, but to be able to calculate the trajectory of a shot so accurately... this was the first time he was seeing

this.

What Shikamaru did not know was that it wasn't the mecha operator who managed this feat, but Little Four substituting for the mecha's A.I... Of course, this was also only possible due to Ling Lan and Little Four's close rapport. Otherwise, if they were unlucky, they might very well have been hit and perished along with the mecha.

Although Ling Lan managed to evade multiple snipes by the mecha operator Shikamaru, she was held back at the same time. When the squad leader chasing them got within 100 metres of Ling Lan, he sneakily raised the beam cannon in his hands to aim at Ling Lan who was still busily dodging Shikamaru's attacks, prepared to lock onto her and shoot.

"Boss, the other mecha is also about to attack," cautioned Little Four anxiously.

"Troublesome!" Ling Lan was confident that she could successfully dodge all the snipe attacks of one mecha, but if two mecha attacked at the same time, Ling Lan wasn't sure if she could remain unharmed.

That said, Ling Lan's control hand speed actually increased by one level. Right then, the outlines of Ling Lan's fingers were no longer visible, nor was it possible to see which buttons were being pressed. At most, on the control panel, one could only see the countless afterimages of her fingers, just like blossom after blossom of flowers blooming, beautiful and ephemeral...

Chapter 149

Looking For an Answer!

Just when the squad leader was about to lock onto Ling Lan's mecha, the mecha's waist twisted into a very bizarre position, and its initial forwards flight trajectory suddenly took a 180 degree turn.

It should be known that for a mecha to change directions, they either needed to curve and make a U-turn in the form of a semi-circle, or they could choose to stop their engines and turn their body around before starting their engines again. The first option would maintain a mecha's speed, but required time; the second was immediate, but the mecha would lose the speed it had built up.

However, this control of Ling Lan suppressed the weaknesses of the two options and kept most of their strengths. This was a control method unique to the Mandora star system that Ling Lan had learned from Instructor Number Three in the learning space. Of course, according to what Instructor Number Three said, this control method was actually still a very basic and flawed one. This was because the mecha of this world were really a bit too crude and simple, meaning many of the more advanced control methods just could not be executed.

The squad leader saw the opponent twist bizarrely — successfully changing directions and maintaining its high speed — and charge fiercely towards him.

"What is this?" the squad leader shouted. This completely went against the principles of mecha control.

If Little Four had known that this move would cause the opponent to be so shocked, he would definitely be extraordinarily smug and laugh up into the skies, because this was a product of their Mandora star system — they had a saying back there which reverberated throughout the entire galaxy, and that was: When Mandora moves, who stands a chance?

Perhaps Ling Lan's control had exceeded the squad leader's expectations, unprepared, he easily let Ling Lan get close to him, and the two looked about to collide in the very next second.

Still, he was the squad leader of an ace mecha squad after all, as well as being an ace mecha member. His mental fortitude and his experience were obviously much better than the other two; his adaptive ability especially was well-seasoned.

The squad leader did not react like Ling Lan's first opponent, Kotou, who had panicked and chosen to dodge. Instead, he calmly turned off his engine thruster. Without the support of the engine thruster, the mecha began plummeting towards the ground due to its own weight.

But after it had dropped about half the body height of the mecha, the squad leader started up the engine once more. At the same time, the upper body of the mecha bent backwards, and its left hand raised a high-frequency blade high to stab at the cockpit of the Federation mecha who had already leapt to his original position.

Of course, even if he managed to hit his target, it would not inflict a fatal injury on the opponent. At most, the opponent would just be struck dizzy for a moment. Yet, that was what he was aiming for. As long as a pause appeared in the opponent's control, he would have the time to counterattack.

However, that would be the best-case scenario. It was also possible that he would not stun the other even if he managed to hit his target, which would instead let the opponent have the opportunity to attack in close range, resulting in a mutually damaging encounter.

But whichever the case, he would not be the loser. He still had a teammate behind him, so even if he and the opponent were both damaged in this encounter, his teammate would be able to eliminate the opponent.

The squad leader knew very well that in this situation right now, he could not afford to retreat. The moment he retreated, he would lose the initiative to attack and would be forced into a defensive position. With just one face-off, he could clearly tell that the opponent was a mecha expert. The opponent definitely would not let any opportunity slip by; he would definitely stick to him like an ulcer to the bone ¹ and launch a barrage of attacks on him as he dodged. When that happened, he would really be in danger. The moment he failed to avoid due to any negligence, he could very well lose his life.

The squad leader really hoped that the opponent would give up attacking and choose to evade his strike. This way, the situation would be reversed, and the one with the attack momentum would be him instead.

The situation was not as advantageous to him as he imagined — the opponent did not choose to evade, but also wasn't struck by him either. The Federation mecha raised his right hand in that brief instant and used a similar high-frequency blade to parry his attack.

An explosive "CLANG!" Two sharp blades collided violently!

Not just that, the opponent's left hand had pulled out the beam saber behind his back at some point, and after blocking with his right hand, the beam saber in his left hand swung ruthlessly at the waist of the squad leader's mecha.

If the squad leader were to be hit by this savage blow, even if his mecha was not chopped in half, the internal driver pathways would definitely be disrupted, which would cause the mecha to malfunction, perhaps even becoming immobile and useless.

The right hand of the squad leader's mecha was equipped with a beam cannon. The beam cannon was large and heavy, but very powerful. As long as it hit, its attack was capable of melting a mecha straightaway, achieving a one-hit kill effect. All this while, countless Federation mecha had been killed by beam cannons — its efficiency was extraordinary.

In terms of long-range attacks, this weapon was fearsome. However, every weapon had its weakness. The beam cannon's was for an enemy to get close. The moment the enemy got close, the heavy bulky beam cannon would become nothing more than a burden, preventing a mecha from moving nimbly, just like the predicament the squad leader was facing right now.

The squad leader was undoubtedly a decisive person. He immediately chose to discard the beam cannon. The large beam cannon dropped from the sky, crashing heavily into the dense foliage below. Without the extra weight of the beam cannon, the now nimble mecha arm rose up to meet the opponent's beam saber.

A dull "Clang" — beam saber and mecha arm collided once again. The two of them were thrown backwards. The Twilight mecha had activated the beam shield on its right arm in that instant, rendering Ling Lan's beam saber attack ineffective.

The squad leader's prompt response let him tide over this crisis safely, but the initially ready to fire Shikamaru began to falter.

While the two mecha were tangled up together, he did not dare to fire his cannon, since

he might hit his own squad leader as well if he wasn't careful.

This was also one reason why Ling Lan had chosen to fight in close quarters with the squad leader. Otherwise, no matter how proficient she was at irregular flight, she would still be hit eventually by one of the two mecha's attacks. Right now, her stubborn insistence on sticking to a close-range fight had tied the hands of the other mecha, temporarily easing her crisis.

But Ling Lan knew that this was just a temporary reprieve — the opponent definitely would not let this passive situation continue. They would definitely find a chance to attack. On her end, she would need to find a way to eliminate one of the mecha before her opponents found that chance. As such, Ling Lan's choice was to start by first targeting this mecha, which was obviously the main attacker.

The two mecha jumped apart immediately upon contact. The Federation mecha's two side engines roared once more, stopping this rebound in its tracks before pushing the mecha forwards once more to hack at the opponent with its right hand. Ling Lan now had to ensure that her mecha remained within a body's length of the Twilight mecha, or else she may draw the other mecha's long-range snipe attacks.

"Baka!" The squad leader had yet to catch his breath when he saw the opponent attacking once more. He hurriedly controlled his mecha to meet the attack with his own blade, a curse spilling from his mouth.

Remember, a proportion of the reaction force when controlling mecha to fight would be fed back onto the mecha operator's body. Therefore, mecha operators had the habit of stopping for a moment to rest after taking action, before moving on to the next move. It was very easy for the body to get injured when executing consecutive moves.

In the cockpit, Ling Lan's complexion was becoming increasingly paler. The load on her body had already exceeded her limits — Little Four was even worried whether his boss would collapse in the next second. This kind of high frequency attack was really too taxing on the body.

Although the battlefield of the mecha and the hiding place of Qi Long and the others were significantly far apart, the two teams in the forest were still somewhat flustered by the intense sounds of collision and the blasts of artillery.

"Qi Long, it's too dangerous for us to stay here. Why don't we continue moving? Let's go around the battlefield to the nearest air raid shelter to hide." Wu Jiong felt that instead of waiting here blindly, they might as well take the risk and continue moving forwards. Perhaps they would stand a better chance that way.

Wu Jiong's words caused everyone's expressions to shift. Han Jijyun and the rest of Ling Lan's team looked to Qi Long, waiting for him to make the decision. When Ling Lan was not around, they would defer to Qi Long. Ling Lan's purposeful cultivation of Qi Long as the team leader had been acknowledged by everyone in the team. So, even if she wasn't there, the team would not lose direction.

After some thought, Qi Long said seriously to his team members, "I'll be staying here to wait. What do you all think?"

Including Han Jijyun, the team members were all taken aback by Qi Long's words.

"Why?" asked Han Jijyun. Qi Long must have his reasons for choosing to stay; they wanted to know the reason before making a decision.

Qi Long raised his head to look at the mecha fighting in the skies in the distance. His gaze was complicated, but he soon regained his composure and turned to face the group, saying, "Boss Lan said that he would come. I need to wait for him."

Han Jijyun and the others abruptly remembered. The situation earlier had been too precarious — the near loss of their lives at the hands of the Twilight mecha had driven this point from their minds. All of them nodded their heads to show that they wanted to wait for their boss together with Qi Long. They believed that since Boss Ling Lan had said he was coming here, then he would definitely come.

Wu Jiong cast a long look at Qi Long and his team, somewhat admiring and somewhat envious. He admired the strong bond of friendship among Ling Lan, Qi Long, and the others of their team, which held up even in the face of death, and also envied their great luck — actually having a boss who would be willing to brave lethal danger to come save them.

"Then we'll leave first." Wu Jiong turned to look at his teammates behind him, gaze lingering on the injured Chen Yu. They could not afford to wait.

Qi Long watched as Wu Jiong left with his team, until their figures disappeared. Then, he turned to say to his companions, "Let us go!"

"Where? Aren't we waiting for Boss Lan?" Luo Lang was bewildered.

"I want to see our saviour's battle up close," said Qi Long, looking to the battlefield in the distance, "Perhaps I will be able to find the answer I want. No, I don't need it..." Qi Long's words were somewhat contradictory.

Han Jijyun was the one who understood Qi Long best. His expression shifted and he asked, "Did you notice something?"

"No, I don't know, and I don't want to know." Qi Long dodged Han Jijyun's question, directly putting on his backpack and heading off towards the mecha battlefield.

Han Jijyun was puzzled, but he did not continue to question Qi Long, merely indicating for Luo Lang and Lin Zhong-qing to follow.

Since Qi Long did not want to talk about it, then he would not ask. He believed that as long as he followed Qi Long, he would be able to find the answer.

The two mecha had been tussling for several moves. Well, it was more of Ling Lan attacking fiercely while the squad leader defended himself passively. Seeing that the situation was not looking good for his squad leader, Shikamaru finally fired.

His marksmanship was very accurate. Even though Ling Lan was fighting the other at such high speeds, she was still shot.

"The mecha's external shell received light damage. The beam's effect is minor. Initial estimations suggest that the other is using a miniature beam gun!" Little Four ran a quick scan of the mecha and reported his findings.

Chapter 150

Ling Lan's Crisis!

It turned out that the waiting mecha operator Shikamaru had finally thought of a way to attack Ling Lan without harming his squad leader. He had decisively set aside the powerful beam cannon, hanging it back on his back, drawing out the miniature beam gun strapped to his waist instead.

The beam gun's power was noticeably weaker than the cannon's, and its range was extremely short. But its advantage was that he did not have to worry about hurting his teammate. Even if he shot his teammate by accident, based on the mecha's innate defensive ability, as long as he did not strike the same place twice, the mecha would not take any significant damage.

He chose to use this beam handgun to snipe, primarily just to harass the Federation mecha operator. Though the shots were weak, they would distract the opponent and prevent him from attacking fiercely. This way, his squad leader would have a chance to counterattack. However, if the opponent decided to just ignore his attacks due to the limited damage of the handgun, he believed that, if given a chance, he would be able to hit the same spot multiple times to deal heavy damage.

Without a doubt, his choice trashed Ling Lan's hopeful plans, allowing him to rejoin the battle without worry.

"Looks like I'll need to come up with something to finish off this mecha in front of me." Ling Lan knew that the scales of victory were slowly tipping in favour of the opponents — she could afford to wait no longer. N-number of options flashed through her mind...

Operator Shikamaru pressed on his trigger once more, and a beam shot out from the muzzle of the beam handgun.

The beam scored a direct hit on the right side of the Federation mecha's waist. The sound of an explosion rent the air — a thick plume of smoke started pouring from the back of the mecha's waist.

"YES!" Shikamaru couldn't help but mentally give himself a pat on the back. This shot,

his luck had actually been so lucky that it had cleanly taken out one of the opponent's side engines. This would create problems for the opponent's mobility system.

Sure enough, because of this incident, the Federation mecha's engines suddenly sputtered and died, causing the entire mecha to plummet.

The squad leader, who had been having a frustrating time fighting the opponent, was startled, but he soon recovered and was overcome with joy. "Chance!"

Who knew his subordinate Shikamaru-kun would be so reliable, directly blowing up the opponent's engine? This was the moment for him to counterattack.

His exhilaration let him forget all about the aches of his body; he controlled his mecha to pounce like a ferocious tiger dashing down a mountain at the Federation mecha. Earlier, he had constantly been on the defensive — now it was finally his turn to beat on the other. Of course he would not miss this great opportunity for revenge.

In the distance, the operator Shikamaru was just about to continue sniping when he saw his squad leader leaping at the opponent. His finger on the trigger paused... Hn, let squad leader vent some of his anger first!

In his mind, the Federation mecha which had already lost one of its main side engines was definitely no threat to his squad leader. Moreover, he also believed that his squad leader would relish the chance to torment the other a little to release the pent up frustration from being suppressed previously. As a dutiful subordinate, he could not get in the way of his squad leader's fun in bullying the opponent.

"The opponent fell for it!" Seeing the squad leader leaping at her, Ling Lan was overjoyed. This had all been a bet — she was betting on this mecha's thirst for revenge, and betting on the other mecha's non-interference — and she had won.

Although Ling Lan was unbelievably hyped, her hands remained steady. She controlled the head of her mecha perfectly, turning it to look up at a very specific angle.

"Calculating attack trajectory, perfect!" Little Four's voice had barely faded when the anti-aircraft missiles in the mecha's head area were launched by Ling Lan.

These two missiles came so suddenly — the opponent would never have expected the supposedly panicking Federation mecha operator to have the mind to launch anti-aircraft missiles.

The squad leader knew that he would not be able to dodge, but still, he wasn't too worried. This was because this type of anti-aircraft missile was not very effective against mecha, due to the resilient outer shell of the mecha that was capable of resisting the explosive power of the missiles.

The squad leader just assumed that this was the desperate final attack of the Federation mecha operator in the throes of death — that even though the opponent knew this attack was useless, he had still fired the missiles.

Before the missiles would hit the squad leader's mecha, they suddenly turned upwards. Abruptly, he found that his main screen was shaking and then thick smoke smothered the entire image. He could only see black smoke on his main screen; the opponent's mecha was concealed.

He reacted quickly, immediately replacing the image of the main screen with the images sourced from other cameras.

"Squad leader, watch out!" The panicked voice of his subordinate Shikamaru came through the communications channel. Reflexively, he controlled the mecha to cross its arms and defend.

He had just completed this move when he felt his mecha being struck by a tremendous force, and then his whole mecha was thrown up into the air.

What was happening? The squad leader was alarmed, finding that things were already out of his control.

From a distance, Shikamaru had the clearest view. The two anti-aircraft missiles fired by the Federation mecha had initially been heading for the squad leader's mecha's shoulder area, only to suddenly shift directions near the end to strike the head. In other words, the opponent had been aiming for the mecha's main camera from the start — the two anti-aircraft missiles were no ordinary missiles, but had been installed with a guidance system.

This proved that the opponent's attack was not a hastily cobbled final struggle, but a pre-planned strike.

The opponent used the low-powered anti-aircraft missiles to disrupt the squad leader's main screen; the thick smoke caused by the explosions were probably also part of the opponent's plan. Then, once the squad leader's vision had been obstructed,

the opponent had launched the extremely powerful inlaid rockets from its chest, sending the squad leader's mecha straight into the air.

Angrily, Shikamaru raised the beam handgun in his hands, prepared to blast the opponent's mecha to smithereens...

But then a shocking thing happened — the engine that should have been damaged by him suddenly roared loudly once more, and the powerful force of its thrust sent the Federation mecha up towards the squad leader's mecha in the air.

On top of that, the Federation mecha's following action made him yell out in shock. He saw the opponent swiftly sheathe the high-frequency blade in its right hand back to the mecha's outer thigh, and then, grabbing its beam saber with both hands, it stabbed straight at the squad leader's cockpit.

"Quick! Activate your beam shield and defend!" Shikamaru screamed.

The squad leader was a leadership figure after all; he managed to activate his beam shield in that instant.

The beam saber and the beam shield collided violently. Ling Lan could only feel a large rebound force feeding back into her hand.

"Little Four, hold steady, don't get repelled!" Ling Lan pushed the mobile force of her mecha to the max, pushing against the rebound, while Little Four desperately worked to make sure that the mecha's systems would not break down under the combined pressure.

In the sky above, a white and blue mecha with a beam saber gripped in both hands could be seen flying past rapidly with its beam saber pushed up against the cockpit of a black mecha, drawing a straight line through the air.

"Baka! Baka!" At this moment, the squad leader, who had finally regained the view of his main screen, started hacking desperately at the Federation mecha with the high-frequency blade in his left hand. Once, twice, thrice — leaving mark after mark on the opponent's mecha.

Within the cockpit, Ling Lan could not endure it any longer, throwing up a mouthful of blood. The hacking of the other mecha caused the mecha to shudder to a certain extent; the consecutive tremors worsened the injuries already borne by Ling Lan.

Under the roiling of her Qi and blood, she actually ended up spewing blood.

"Boss, are you alright?" Little Four was panicking.

"It's fine. I can take it. How much longer can the beam saber hold out?" In this contest between beam saber and beam shield, both sides were expending energy. Whoever ran out of energy first would be the one to disappear. Right now, Ling Lan was betting on the opponent's beam shield expending more energy than her beam saber.

"There's less than 10 seconds left!" Little Four was extremely anxious.

"I'll risk it!" A feral glint flashed through Ling Lan's eyes; in crucial moments, she could even be ruthless to her own self.

"Eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two... Sh*t! There's no more energy..." Little Four's voice had barely faded when Ling Lan felt the force blocking the beam saber in her hand melt away, and the beam saber pierced through something.

And then, all that was left of the beam saber was its hilt. Was this a success or a failure? Ling Lan's doubt lasted for a mere instant; her fingers never stopped, still dancing rapidly, creating those layered afterimages.

The Federation mecha discarded the depleted beam saber from its hands and grabbed the Twilight mecha with its right hand. With it as a fulcrum, the Federation mecha spun in a circle to hide behind the body of the Twilight mecha, successfully dodging the sneaky snipe attack by operator Shikamaru.

"Shikamaru-kun, the Empire's mission is in your hands now," said the squad leader to his distant subordinate, as he looked at the blood gushing out from the hole in his chest.

"Squad leader, what are you saying?" The distant operator Shikamaru had not managed to see what had happened in the end. The beam saber and beam shield had run out of energy at almost the same time.

"Use your beam cannon! That's an order!" The squad leader felt that his life was slowly fading. With his last breath, he gave this command, and then triggered the mecha's self-destruct mechanism.

"Even if I die, I will pull you down into hell with me!" bellowed the squad leader with

the final bit of his energy.

"Squad leader!" Shikamaru now understood what had happened. In those final moments, the beam saber had likely lasted a second longer than the beam shield. In that one second, the saber had pierced through a vital point of the squad leader. This was why the squad leader wanted him to switch to the beam cannon — he did not have long to live.

"Squad leader, the Empire shall not forget your sacrifice!" Mecha operator Shikamaru's eyes were ice cold. He threw away the beam handgun in his hand, and once again lifted up the beam cannon from his back. Getting into position, he aimed right at his squad leader's mecha... as well as the Federation mecha hiding behind it!

"Not good. The other mecha has switched over to its beam cannon." This whole time, Little Four had been monitoring the Twilight mecha sniping them from a distance.

"Does he not care that his comrade will die?" Ling Lan's first thought was that the other had gone mad.

"No..." Ling Lan abruptly felt a deep apprehension crawl into her heart, the warning bells in her mind were ringing.

Without even having to think about it, her fingers flew — in this kind of life-or-death juncture, she did not think about the so-called limit of her finger speed. In her mind, there was only one thought — she needed to be fast, faster, even faster than faster... because she was fighting with the god of death for the time to survive.

This time, the control panel no longer had those layered afterimages — instead, Ling Lan's fingers disappeared into thin air...

Chapter 151

Only Chance is to Get Close!

Ling Lan's mecha suddenly dipped, the entire mecha somersaulting, then it bent both knees to kick out abruptly, sending the Twilight Empire mecha in its hands flying.

The Twilight mecha flew like a missile, hurtling straight for the sniping mecha in the distance. Meanwhile, riding the reaction force of the kick, Ling Lan's mecha flew backwards. Almost at the same time, Ling Lan activated the mecha's engines to full power, adding onto her momentum to push her mecha's large body further away from the kicked mecha.

From around 300 metres away, the Twilight mecha responsible for sniping pressed the trigger of the beam cannon. An extremely powerful energy beam shot out from the mouth of the cannon...

An intense explosion rent the air. The force of the explosion was so strong that it sent out powerful shockwaves which could be felt from even 2 to 3 kilometres away. Meanwhile, close to the heart of the explosion, stretching out 500 metres, all the trees and plants had been ravaged by this great explosion. In particular, 100 metres around the centremost point, there was not a speck of greenery left. All that remained was turned up black dirt and a large pit of about 50 metres wide.

At this life-or-death juncture, Ling Lan's mecha control had exceeded her limits, achieving a realm regular people were unable to obtain. But despite her speedy reaction, she still did not manage to completely escape the range of the Twilight mecha's self-destruction. Her mecha's right leg was blown to smithereens.

This immense concussive force also dealt heavy damage to Ling Lan herself. With a cry, she once again threw up a mouthful of blood, her head spinning.

Ling Lan bit down fiercely on the tip of her tongue, letting the sharp pain force her back to wakefulness. She wiped away the traces of blood at the corners of her lips and asked, "What happened? How could the explosion from self-destructing be so strong?"

Little Four gave his analysis instantly, "The mecha self-destructed at the moment the

beam cannon struck, igniting the full force of the cannon beam. The two energy waves added to each other, resulting in an effect N-times stronger than just pure addition."

"Looks like it involved some chemical reaction." Ling Lan frowned. This unpredictable explosive force was the cause of the severe damage to both her mecha and herself.

Marching rapidly, Qi Long and the others were thrown off their feet by the tremors from the explosion. The weakest Han Jijyun was even sent flying, but fortunately, Qi Long was able to react in time to press him down to the ground so he wasn't injured.

Qi Long waited for the tremors to stop and then climbed up quickly to look into the sky. He saw that the Federation mecha's right leg had been destroyed in the blast, and his complexion paled.

"We need to move a little faster." The aerial battle did not seem too far, but was in fact 3 to 4 kilometres away. Qi Long and the others were already moving extremely rapidly, but still only managed to cover half the distance thus far.

However, this time, Qi Long's decision drew his sworn brother Han Jijyun's objection. "Qi Long, the closer we get to the mecha battlefield, the more danger we'll face. Especially now, the mecha on both sides are obviously at the do-or-die moment — at any point, they could choose to self-destruct to bring the other with them. If we get too close, judging by the explosion just now, we will die immediately."

Han Jijyun was extremely rational, not at all led by his emotions. Thus, seeing that progressing further would threaten their lives, he raised his objection, not allowing Qi Long to behave wilfully just because they were sworn brothers.

"I know." Qi Long did not deny the truth of Han Jijyun's words. He too knew that going closer was not a smart move, but a voice in his heart was yelling at him to get as close as he could — if he didn't obey, he felt as if he would die from the tension and sense of suffocation in his chest.

Qi Long pointed at his chest and said, "But, my heart tells me that I should go there. You know well that many times, my heart is more accurate than my mind... although I don't know why it wants me to do this... but, what you say is right. Getting close is really very dangerous. I cannot be selfish and ask you all to take this risk with me."

Qi Long felt that he had been selfish. He should have explained things clearly to his teammates and discussed the matter first before making a decision.

Han Jijyun looked at Qi Long silently, and found that Qi Long's gaze was extremely determined — he was dead-set on getting close. As his sworn brother, Han Jijyun understood Qi Long well. Although Qi Long seemed brash and forthright on the surface, not placing anything but combat in his mind... In truth, Qi Long's personality was very stubborn. Once he had made a decision, even a herd of thousands of cows would not be able to hold him back¹.

"I want to go," said Luo Lang suddenly.

Luo Lang's abrupt interjection caused Qi Long and Han Jijyun to turn and look at him with some befuddlement. With some embarrassment, Luo Lang scratched at a cheek and said with a smile, "Actually, everyone knows that Qi Long's animal instinct is very accurate. If instinct is telling Qi Long that he must go there, then there must be something there. Perhaps it might even be safer there. Besides..." Luo Lang's expression became serious, "I also want to watch our saviour kill off the enemy and return safely to camp..."

At this moment, Lin Zhong-qing chimed in as well, "Honestly, I want to go too..."

Even Luo Lang was surprised by this, looking over in shock. Luo Lang's support of Qi Long's decision was largely due to the fact that he had become sworn brothers with Qi and Han Jijyun since they started school, so it made sense to advance and retreat in accord. However, Lin Zhong-qing joined later, so his relationship with all of them naturally wasn't as deep. It was understandable that Luo Lang and Han Jijyun were willing to take the risk with Qi Long, but Lin Zhong-qing's decision was obviously a little beyond their expectations.

The three of them focused their attention on Lin Zhong-qing, waiting for his explanation.

Lin Zhong-qing said seriously, "Whether the team leader's instinct is right or not, I do not know. However, the fact that I want to become strong is not a lie. So, I cannot retreat because I fear danger... cowards will never become strong."

Regardless of whether Lin Zhong-qing's reason was true or false, his support undoubtedly stunned Qi Long and the other two. Lin Zhong-qing's willingness to risk

his life by throwing in his lot with them proved that he truly considered himself a member of their team now, and wasn't just here because he had been forced to by circumstance.

Han Jijyun forcefully held back the surging emotions in his heart and said, "In that case, team leader, bring us along."

Qi Long looked around at the three people in front of him, nodded solemnly and said, "Okay! Let's go!"

From then on, they no longer doubted; there was only the strong bond between brothers who were willing to brave life and death together.

The four of them moved with Qi Long in the lead, Han Jijyun right behind, Lin Zhongqing in third, and Luo Lang watching their backs. They swiftly made their way through the dense forest. The violent tremors caused by the previous explosion were not purely bad — it also brought about a small benefit. There were no longer any savage beasts in this area of the forest. Even if some savage beasts were lingering around previously, the force of the explosion had scared them enough to send them running into F-class territory. Therefore, Qi Long and his company did not meet any obstacles whatsoever; it was smooth sailing all the way to their destination.

Along the way, Han Jijyun quietly said to Qi Long, "Qi Long, you must definitely become a qualified team leader!" Han Jijyun's voice was extremely, extremely soft, so soft that it was more like Han Jijyun talking to himself.

At the front, Qi Long jerked. His chest throbbed. In a position no one else could see, his fists clenched.

Meanwhile, in the aerial battlefield, Ling Lan was facing another crisis. In order to dodge the opponent's snipes, Ling Lan had no choice but to once again control the mecha to execute irregular flight. However, this type of advanced flight movement put a heavy burden on the mecha.

Right then, on the secondary screens on both sides, many areas had lit up with flashing red warning alerts. The entire cockpit was drowned in a sea of alarms.

"Little Four, scan damage condition." Ling Lan commanded Little Four to report as she

controlled her mecha to dodge the opponent's fire.

"Right leg damage 100%, left leg damage 30%, right main engine working under duress, the entire mecha's overall damage at 52%... Ah, it's 53% now... Boss, every time you execute irregular flight with the mecha, the damage rate goes up. Estimated 10 more minutes at max before the mecha disassembles..." Little Four quickly reported the condition of the mecha to Ling Lan. "Most importantly, because of the continuous fighting, there's only one secondary energy block of the mecha's driving energy remaining. 20% has already been used. If we fight at full strength, it can only hold out for 5 minutes!"

"That's really bad news!" Ling Lan grit her teeth. In short, this mecha would not be able to hold out for much longer, so she would need to find a chance to counterattack within this limited time. Otherwise, she could only let the opponent chase her around and be beaten to death.

"Little Four, how many more usable weapons do we have?" Ling Lan controlled her mecha to dodge another of the opponent's attacks, and the screen flashed with red warnings. The alert that the mecha's damage levels were at 55% caused her brows to furrow.

"Hanging on the left shoulder, a 57mm high-energy beam rifle, able to fire 18 shots. In the two slots on the outer thigh, a high-frequency blade in each one," said Little Four regretfully, "Only these."

"We need to think of a way to get close..." Ling Lan silently planned. Solely depending on the 18 projectiles of the 57mm high-energy beam rifle, it was impossible to finish off the opponent. Only if she got close would she have a chance. Even though the high-frequency blades were a little blunt, a few extra hacks would make up the difference.

However, the opponent also knew what the consequence of letting Ling Lan get close would be, and so was extremely cautious. Every time Ling Lan attempted to get close, the opponent would swiftly back away to keep a certain distance between him and Ling Lan. In other words, the opponent was planning to attack Ling Lan from a distance till she died ².

"Little Four, analyse the surrounding terrain!" While flying, Ling Lan took down the 57mm high-energy beam rifle with the mecha's right arm as she waited for the results of Little Four's analysis.

"The north, east, and west are all just filled with endless plain and forest shrubs. The ground condition is soft and the earth is slightly loose. About 300 metres to the west, there is a rock mountain. The close-up image indicates that it is adamantite ³..." Little Four reported on the surrounding terrain one by one to Ling Lan.

"Adamantite?" Ling Lan's gaze flashed, as if thinking of something, "How high is its hardness factor?"

"Up to 12!" responded Little Four with certainty.

"That's enough!" Ling Lan instantly made her decision. Still in flight, she lifted the beam rifle in her right hand and began shooting at the opponent.

Shooting was certainly not her one of her strong suits. That said, this was only in comparison with her personal strong suits. If compared to another person, Ling Lan's marksmanship was considered in the upper range of good — it just wasn't at the most excellent level, that's all.

Chapter 152

Self-Destruct!

It was extremely difficult to shoot accurately while flying at high speed. Furthermore, ace mecha operators basically all knew how to dodge using irregular flight, some even able to use irregular flicker for long periods of time. Thus, in a battle between opponents of the same level for advanced mecha operators and above, to defeat the other with pure gunfire... this was almost impossible.

However, Ling Lan had not planned to incapacitate the opponent with just her beam rifle to begin with. She was only using it to create the impression that she was fighting for her life; in reality, she was preparing to lure the opponent to the rock mountain.

The two mecha shot at one another with the guns in their hands, neither doing damage to the other. Still, because the Twilight mecha operator's beam cannon was a more powerful weapon, Ling Lan was at a disadvantage.

In this manner, Ling Lan had no choice but to retreat as she fought, slowly drawing the opponent to the rock mountain.

18 beam shots were not much. Ling Lan had already calculated and used them sparingly, but they were gone in a blink of an eye. Though she knew very well that she had no shots left in her rifle, she pretended not to know, pressing her trigger once more as she aimed at the Twilight mecha...

No more? Panic. The anxious Federation operator once again controlled his mecha to press down on the trigger again and again... but there was still nothing!

Mecha operator Shikamaru saw that the Federation mecha's movements were somewhat flustered — repeatedly pressing on the trigger, but its beam rifle did not respond. He paused, thinking to himself. Could this be a trap?

Shikamaru cannot be blamed for being wary. The example of his squad leader was still fresh in his mind. Remembering how his squad leader fell for plot after plot before finally self-destructing had made him jumpy and paranoid ¹. His first reaction to any strange situation now was to wonder whether the opponent had some plot up his

sleeve.

However, when he saw the Federation mecha throw away the beam rifle in the end and turn tail to run, he knew that the other's rifle had truly run out of power.

Shikamaru's heart leapt in joy. This meant that the opponent no longer had any long-range attacks. As long as he kept his distance, long-range attacks were his domain now. He immediately controlled his mecha to chase after the fleeing Federation mecha.

Of course, Shikamaru could only give chase without worry because Ling Lan had thrown away her beam rifle. If the opponent were still holding onto his rifle, Shikamaru would definitely be on his guard and not chase so closely on the opponent's heels.

The two mecha began a game of tag — at one point, the Twilight mecha shot its beam cannon once, but the shot was dodged nimbly by the Federation mecha operator. This caused Shikamaru to curse internally. It has already been three rounds of continuous battle — why was the opponent still so focused?

"Little Four, have you finished calculating?" Ling Lan asked calmly, not at all influenced by the cascading flashing red alerts all over her screen.

"The beam cannon requires roughly 55 seconds to gather its energy, but this doesn't exclude the fact that the opponent could be faking," responded Little Four. While the opponent had been firing at them, Little Four had been constantly gathering data and analysing it. However, what he could analyse was merely what the opponent revealed. If the opponent just happened to be as cunning as his boss, then his analyses could very well all be wrong.

"How likely is that?" asked Ling Lan.

"About 15% chance," replied Little Four. After all, this data was gathered within a short period of time, so some error was to be expected. Thus, the risk of this being a plot was still quite high.

"In other words, 85% chance of winning. It would be stupid not to take the risk." A trace of a smile appeared on Ling Lan's lips. In the learning space, as long as there was more than 50% chance of winning, she would fight for it, because if you didn't, you would definitely die.

"Yup. Also, the mecha's damage levels are already at 75%. From this point on, the mecha's damage rate will double, so it may not hold out for even 2 minutes..." reminded Little Four, looking at the horrifying damage levels of the mecha and its almost depleted power.

Ling Lan did not respond. Her fingers sped up even more, and this time, her fingers completely disappeared. Focused on the controls, Ling Lan did not notice, while Little Four did not dare to say anything about it, afraid that he would distract Ling Lan.

Ling Lan's mecha began circling the rock mountain as it flew; she was still waiting for an opportunity.

"Boom!" The Twilight mecha on her tail fired its beam cannon once more. The immense beam flew at her from a diagonal angle. Ling Lan calmly executed a small range irregular movement, dodging the attack.

Irregular movement placed a heavier burden on mecha — Ling Lan could even hear the mecha's body emitting creaking noises. The mecha was very likely to break apart soon.

However, Ling Lan paid no attention to all this. Instead, she continued by pulling off a surprising move — she turned off the mecha's engines. Then, she controlled the mecha to get into a pose where all four limbs were facing the ground, and with the limbs as landing pads, her mecha began falling towards the rock mountain below.

Ling Lan was not very high above the rock mountain to begin with, and the mecha itself was heavy, so it took less than 10 seconds for the mecha to crash into the rock mountain.

A loud "Boom"! The forceful impact caused the rock mountain to quake, throwing dust into the air, and Ling Lan's mecha was soon obscured within it.

Shikamaru had quickly halted his mecha when Ling Lan's mecha had dropped, keeping his distance. Extremely cautiously, he kept his cannon trained at the dust cloud. At any odd movement, he would dodge and shoot. Ling Lan had been wily from the start; this made Shikamaru very wary.

Of course, all this happened within the blink of an eye — Shikamaru had just gotten ready when a blue and white figure leapt out from the dust cloud, lunging at him at a frightful speed.

This speed was definitely not a speed an advanced mecha could achieve — Shikamaru's first reaction was to retreat and then he reflexively pressed down on the trigger of his cannon... but nothing happened. He glanced at the indicator on his screen, only to find that the 55-second recharge time wasn't over yet; there were still 11 seconds remaining.

Shikamaru gritted his teeth and pushed his engines to their limits, letting the mecha retreat at full speed. He needed to get past this brief 11 seconds — as long as he could survive till then, a shot from his beam cannon would be enough to destroy this detestable Federation mecha in front of him.

The Federation mecha leaping at the Twilight mecha was currently already worn and battered. Its initially still intact left leg had also disappeared by this time; all that was left were some broken edges at its thighs. The entire outer shell of the mecha was covered in scratches, and some of its internal parts were even exposed at certain areas. That last fall had indeed caused significant damage to the mecha's body.

"The mecha can only hold out for another 50 seconds at most..." Little Four was doing his best to maintain the condition of the mecha so that it wouldn't break apart in the very next second.

Ling Lan did not seem to hear Little Four's warning. Right then, she felt as if she was an outside observer, watching herself operate the mecha with cold eyes. Her thought processes were somewhat mechanical, accurately pushing the engines to the maximum speed the mecha could take, aiming the mecha to pounce at the opponent at almost light speed.

At this moment, the two mecha's roles in their game of tag were now reversed, and the distance between them grew increasingly closer... One of them was anxiously waiting for his beam cannon to recharge, while the other was waiting for the final gap between them to close. She had done everything she could, now it was up to the goddess of luck to decide who she would favour.

Shikamaru watched as the Federation mecha got closer and closer. 10 metres, 5 metres, 3 metres... a feral smile emerged on his face, "Die!"

He decisively pressed the button to fire his beam cannon. At that very moment, the cannon's power had finally finished recharging, allowing it to fire once again.

A crisp yet resounding "SNAP", and Shikamaru saw sparks bloom at his right shoulder from the corner of his eyes. Then, he realised in shock that the beam cannon on his right shoulder had not fired at all...

"Warning! Right arm control system has been destroyed. Please repair immediately!" The A.I. mechanically reported the damage sustained by the mecha.

Shikamaru had no idea what had happened, but still understood that his mecha must have somehow been manipulated by the opponent, causing the cannon on its right arm to become useless... cold sweat beaded on his forehead. Without thinking about it, he forced his engines to speed up even more, trying to pull away and distance himself from the opponent.

As long as he could pull away, his left hand could take over and use the weapon in his right hand. When that time came, victory would still be his.

Shikamaru's plan was beautiful, but reality was not as cooperative as he had hoped. He felt his mecha sink downwards. It turned out that the despicable Federation mecha had actually caught his mecha in a tight hug. In other words, no matter how much he accelerated, he would not be able to pull away from the Federation mecha.

This continuous series of actions caused Ling Lan's complexion to be as white as paper. Blood spilled uncontrollably from her mouth in large heaves. Still, Ling Lan tenaciously held on. She decisively pulled up the self-destruct mechanism of her mecha, and pressed down on the cockpit's eject button at the same time.

"Little Four, the rest is in your hands." These were Ling Lan's final words before she lost consciousness. Of course, this was because Ling Lan fully trusted Little Four, otherwise she would not so easily allow herself to faint away.

The moment the cockpit was ejected, control would be handed over to the A.I... The A.I. would calculate the best reactionary force to apply for a safe landing and determine a secure landing spot. On this front, Little Four was undoubtedly even more reliable than any regular A.I...

"Leave it to me, Boss!" said Little Four solemnly. He knew very well that Ling Lan was putting her life in his hands — this was a display of Ling Lan's faith in him. At this thought, Little Four's core chip burned. This made Little Four a little worried about whether his chip would overheat and blow.

On his side camera, Shikamaru saw the ejected cockpit of the Federation mecha and immediately realised what was about to happen. He tried to get the Federation mecha still clinging to him off, but either Ling Lan had made the mecha hold on very tightly, or Shikamaru himself was too panicked — he was actually unable to find a way to get the mecha off. He was trapped.

Right then, Qi Long and the others had already made their way to a spot about 1 kilometre away from the battle. When they saw the Federation mecha crash into the rock mountain, they could not help but be anxious and despair. But then they saw the Federation mecha shoot out once more from the dust cloud, and almost leapt up in their excitement.

They also saw the Federation mecha shoot a white light from its right hand at the Twilight mecha when the two were about 3 metres apart. This move was too sudden, so subtle that the Twilight mecha did not detect it.

Chapter 153

Goddess of Luck?

Subsequently, they saw sparks shooting out from the Twilight mecha's right shoulder joint. A high-frequency blade was embedded in it up to the hilt. The small group immediately understood what the previous flash of white light was. Apparently, the Federation mecha had hurled the high-frequency blade in its hands at the crucial moment, aiming for the weakest defensive spot of a mecha, its joints, and had succeeded in one go!

The Federation mecha operator's distinctive combat style undoubtedly expanded the group's horizons. This would also influence them in future when they learned how to operate mecha — they would not be limited by the doctrine of previous operators. Daring in both thought and action, they would create countless miraculous combat moves in mecha control in their respective domains...

At present, the Federation mecha had successfully gotten close to the Twilight mecha, but having no more weapons, it could only rely on its remaining mechanical arms to hug the enemy mecha tight, and then the cockpit was seen to be ejected...

With the exception of Lin Zhong-qing, Qi Long and the others were all from a federal military system background. Although they had not operated a mecha yet, they were still very familiar with mecha. From this scene alone, they could tell that the Federation mecha operator had chosen to self-destruct to finish off this final opponent.

But was the 30 seconds before the explosion initiated enough for the ejected cockpit to safely escape the blast radius? Normally, the mecha's self-destruct mechanism was meant for the operator to die along with the enemy...

"Boom!" "Crack!" "Kaboom!"

The first sound was the Federation mecha self-destructing, and then, perhaps the explosion sparked something, for the beam cannon on Twilight mecha's right arm suddenly split open, causing the Twilight mecha to blow up as well in a large blast.

Of course, before the big explosion, the opponent's cockpit had also been ejected, but the following second and third blasts undoubtedly intensified the concussive force — the opponent just did not have the time to escape the blast radius. He was instantly blown sky high right at the heart of the explosion, plummeting to the ground in blackened crisps and thick smoke.

Without even having to check, Qi Long and the others knew that that mecha operator was definitely dead. Just looking at the mass that was left — already a whole half size smaller than the cockpit was at the start — it was certain that the person inside could not have survived.

Fortunately, the Federation mecha's cockpit had been ejected much earlier and had been flying at a faster speed. It had shot away from the blast centre by almost 500 metres, just escaping the most dangerous zone. But even so, it was still thrown further away by the blast by about 100 metres before it began to descend in a natural curve, heading swiftly towards the ground.

Qi Long and the others were extremely anxious, hearts lodged high in their throats. Deep down, they prayed that the concussive force of the explosion had not destroyed the A.I. inside the cockpit...

Their prayers were effective — when the cockpit reached a particular altitude, the cockpit's reactive thrust powered on, slowing the cockpit's descent.

After self-destructing, ejecting the cockpit had a 9 in 10 chance of ending in death; it was basically just there for self-reassurance. Not only did the cockpit have to get out of the blast range, it had to be ejected high enough, and the reactive thrust must activate accurately. Every single item on that list had to be met, otherwise ejection would still result in death.

Luckily, the cockpit was being controlled by Little Four. Otherwise, relying on the Federation's current A.I.s, who knew what the outcome would be? The Federation's A.I.s could only mechanically remember some data sets, and execute operations based on regulated settings — it would not consider other variable factors.

Seeing the cockpit land safely under the application of reactive thrust, Qi Long and the others instantly let out a sigh of relief. They hurriedly made their way over to the landing spot of the cockpit to check on the pilot. If they could help out somehow, then them rushing here would be so worth it.

"Boss, Boss, we're safe now." Little Four's calculations were accurate, letting the cockpit land safely. He called out in excitement to Ling Lan, wanting her to praise him.

However, the inside of the cockpit was still and silent. Only then did Little Four notice the blood still dripping continuously from his boss's lips. "Boss, stop scaring me, wake up! Wake up!" he shouted desperately, but Ling Lan remained silent. Thinking of something, Little Four quickly detached from the mecha's A.I. to look for Ling Lan in the learning space. However, inside, he still found no sign of Ling Lan. Instantly, he panicked, knowing that things were not good.

"Boss must have taken a great deal of damage and lost consciousness. At this time, I must let her eat some healing medical agents..." Little Four figured it out, but he was just a formless intelligence entity, and so had no limbs to use to feed Ling Lan. At this moment, Little Four hated the fact that he was an intelligence bio-entity.

Right then, Little Four suddenly sensed people approaching! Anxiously, he scanned the surroundings, and when he saw those few familiar figures, he was instantly overcome with joy. Boss was saved! Qi Long and the others had arrived.

From a distance, Qi Long could see the cockpit lying silently on the ground. He signalled for Han Jijyun and the other two behind him to wait while he carefully crept closer to the cockpit, wanting to observe the situation.

He had just gotten within 100 metres of the cockpit when the doors to the cockpit suddenly swung open, startling Qi Long. But he was soon taken with joy — the fact that the cockpit was opened from within meant that the person inside was still alive, otherwise the doors would not open on their own. Of course, Qi Long did not know that this world had such a miraculous existence as Little Four.

Qi Long did not choose to go closer, patiently waiting for the mecha operator inside to come out. A stranger approaching without reason would be easily misunderstood, especially when on a battlefield. Warriors were extremely sensitive after fighting — any strange movements would just prompt a counterattack. Although Qi Long wanted to help their saviour, he did not want to randomly lose his life here, so he retained the necessary caution. Of course, Ling Lan's subtle training all these years was also a reason.

Qi Long waited patiently for a few minutes, but did not see anyone coming out. In fact, Little Four was already anxiously jumping up and down in the cockpit — if not for the

fact that he had no voice, he would have otherwise long called Qi Long and the others over.

Qi Long's pause puzzled Han Jijyun and the others, so Han Jijyun led Luo Lang and Lin Zhong-qing over as well, coming to stand beside Qi Long. At this moment, they too saw the opened cockpit.

"Qi Long, could it be that the person inside is injured and can't get out?" Han Jijyun thought of this possibility.

Qi Long's eyes brightened, thinking to himself that what Han Jijyun said made sense. He decided to go forward on his own and see, and let Han Jijyun and the others continue to wait here. He got closer and closer, and when he saw the blood within the cockpit, all wariness he still had fled instantly. He hurriedly quickened his pace to rush to the door of the cockpit and looked inside.

"Jijyun, it's not good, come over quickly!" Qi Long's voice actually held true grief.

Han Jijyun's heart skipped a beat — could the mecha operator inside be one of Qi Long's relatives? He hurriedly ran over with Luo Lang and Lin Zhong-qing. When he saw the unconscious small figure inside who was still bleeding from the mouth, his expression changed drastically, and he shouted, "Boss Lan! This cannot be, how can it be him..." Those were ace mecha operators he was fighting! Boss Lan was only 10 years old — there was no way he could control mecha... Han Jijyun felt everything he thought he knew about mecha completely collapse at this moment.

"Will Boss Lan die...?" Seeing the terrible state Ling Lan was in, Luo Lang felt a chill spread throughout his entire body, and his body began shivering uncontrollably. Meanwhile, Lin Zhong-qing was even more stunned, unable to form a coherent thought for a long moment.

"Quick, feed him some healing agents!" Han Jijyun saw that the others were panicking, and so quickly collected his emotions to order calmly.

"Oh, oh!" Qi Long and the others hurriedly pulled out the medicinal agents they had in their backpacks and tried feeding them to Ling Lan. However, because their hands were shaking, the agents spilled, missing their mark to slide off Ling Lan's lips.

"Let me!" Han Jijyun quickly pushed away the typically bold and brash idiots who were currently flailing in their panic. He took one pack of agent from Luo Lang's hands, and

using his left hand to pry open Ling Lan's mouth, he poured the agent in.

"Another!" Han Jijyun indicated for them to pass him more and continued to pour, only stopping after five full packs were gone.

The effect of five packs of medicinal agents were pretty good. The initially pale-white complexion of Ling Lan started to warm, and the blood flowing from her mouth started to slow. Three minutes later, Ling Lan was no longer spewing blood.

"We have to return to the camp site immediately, otherwise Boss's injuries will not be able to be healed. If any aftereffects are left, this might destroy Boss's future!" Seeing Ling Lan no longer at the brink of death, Qi Long's rationality returned.

Qi Long's words naturally obtained everyone's agreement. They carefully lifted Ling Lan out from the cockpit, and then looked for materials in the surroundings to make a simple stretcher to carry Ling Lan in. After all, it was better for Ling Lan to lie down and be still in his current condition.

While searching for materials, they actually stumbled upon the beam cannon discarded by the Twilight Empire's squad leader previously. The beam cannon was very large and heavy. It was impossible for the four of them to carry it with them.

After some thought, Han Jijyun asked Qi Long and the others carry Ling Lan's cockpit over to the beam cannon. Under Qi Long and the others' confused gazes, Han Jijyun positioned the cockpit within the line of attack of the beam cannon and triggered the cannon. The shot utterly destroyed Ling Lan's cockpit, melting it down, leaving no trace.

At this moment, Qi Long and the others finally realised why Han Jijyun did this. Destroying the cockpit would also destroy the black box within it. Consequently, no one would be able to find out about Ling Lan's battle and defeat of the three Twilight ace mecha. (They did not know that Little Four had long wiped the data files within the black box.) Then, Ling Lan's true capabilities could be concealed and remain undiscovered. Mind you, if someone else were to find out about this, Ling Lan would definitely be embroiled in much trouble in the near future, and her life may even be threatened. They all understood the theory of the wind toppling the tree above the treeline.

In this manner, the four of them destroyed anything that could expose Ling Lan's

capabilities, and then began to trek back to the camp site carrying the still unconscious Ling Lan.

This journey was very difficult — many times, they almost ended up becoming a meal for the F-class savage beasts. However, each time they were in a tight spot, those savage beasts would suddenly get spooked and turn tail and run away desperately, disappearing into the forest... Even as this puzzled them, they couldn't help but be thankful for the blessing of the goddess of luck, letting this miraculous thing happen again and again.

Little Four pursed his lips, pouting, displeased with this so-called 'goddess of luck' who was claiming the credit for his work. Dammit, if I hadn't released the blood-tinged killing intent concealed within Boss's body to scare off those small fry, you would all be the excrement of those savage beasts by now... Hmph, goddess of luck, my foot!

Chapter 154

Awakening!

In outer space, in the control room of the Twilight Empire interstellar mothership, a group of people had already been waiting patiently for several hours. But as time went by and there was no news from below, they began to grow restless and began discussing what they should do next.

"Commander, the enemy's reinforcement fleets are at this point, while our reinforcement fleets are here," reported the chief of staff, pointing out the locations on the star map on the big screen.

"In three hours, the enemy's starships will appear in the outer space of this planet," the chief of staff continued to say after referencing the information.

"This fleet — before they can reach here, they should be attacked by our empire's reinforcement fleet. We still have time." The commander was unwilling to just give up now. The planet below was currently in a melee combat stage — no one could tell yet who the final winner or loser would be.

"Where are Ikeda-kun and the others now?" asked the commander.

"They've already landed safely and are currently carrying out Operation Decapitation. However, only two teams have managed to assemble. The others are either missing or have been nobly sacrificed in battle," replied a staff officer in charge of keeping track of the dead and injured.

"Any movement from the other fleets of the Federation?" the commander asked the chief of staff.

The chief of staff immediately pointed out three dots closest to this planet and said, "At each of these three points, a fleet is stationed there. Although our covert scouting did not manage to find out their destinations, based on the current situation, they will definitely be heading our way."

"If they rush here, we will have no chance of winning this battle." This planet was the

closest to the three countries — the Federation, Caesar, and Gelland — and was honestly a bit far from Twilight. Thus, their interstellar fleets could not speedily send assistance, unlike the Federation.

After a thoughtful silence, the commander asked, "How much time do we have left at most?"

"If we don't consider that first fleet, at most 7 hours." The chief of staff gave his verdict.

"Pass on the order to Ikeda-kun. They only have 7 hours, no, 6 hours and a half. If they cannot carry out Operation Decapitation in 6 and a half hours, they will be abandoned," said the commander ruthlessly.

"Hai!" Everyone bowed their heads fearfully as they accepted the order. Within Twilight, the supreme commander had the ultimate right to decide whether the warriors below lived or died.

Time passed bit by bit. The first reinforcement fleet was attacked by a Twilight Empire reinforcement fleet even before they entered the starspace of this planet. Both sides began an intense starship battle, involving thousands of starships respectively. Over a hundred thousand starship warriors were killed in this space battle.

When only half an hour remained on the clock, dark clouds blanketed the whole Twilight interstellar mothership control room. Everyone's face was a sheet of grey — they could already feel the failure of their invasion plan this time.

"Why do we still not hear anything from Ikeda-kun?" Seeing that the opponent's reinforcements were almost here, the commander of the mothership in outer space started yelling in anger.

The people around him could only bow their heads in silence. At this moment, everyone felt that the odds were not in team leader Ikeda's favour.

"Baka! All useless trash!" Frankly, the commander did not have a good feeling about this as well; he was just unwilling to accept it. Of course, they did not know that of their two surviving teams of ace mecha, one had died without fanfare, courtesy of Ling Lan. It was just that no one would ever know, besides Qi Long's group of four.

Meanwhile, the other team very unfortunately crossed paths with the mecha squad of the camp's supreme commander. The supreme commander himself was an ace

operator at his peak, just one step away from advancing to imperial level. And the weakest member of the squad protecting him was still a special-class mecha operator. The camp commander was extremely cunning — seeing this ace mecha team, he immediately ordered his mecha team to surround and kill them.

That team did not even have the chance to fight back, dying under the collective shots of countless beam guns. In this way, Operation Decapitation was easily nipped in the bud.

As Qi Long and the others were rushing back to the main camp, the battle was already reaching its end. The starships in the space above the planet were beginning to retreat systematically in the directions of their respective countries.

Of course, the departure of the starships meant that any mecha operators left on the planet had basically been abandoned. The planet's main camp released the call to surrender — however, the Twilight Empire mecha operators had been brainwashed very thoroughly by their nation. When they knew they had no more chance of survival, these Twilight mecha operators did not lose their fighting spirit, nor did they choose to surrender. Instead, they exploded with astounding combat ability, dragging quite a few Federation mecha operators down with them as they died. This frightened the cold sweat out of the Federation mecha operators, so they no longer dared to hold any sympathy for these abandoned soldiers — they began shooting the moment they saw one alive.

This situation resulted in very few injured members on both sides. Twilight did not need any prisoners, so if they won in a fight, they would immediately take the opponent's life. In return, the Federation returned tooth for tooth, blood for blood — by the end, no one was willing to spare the lives of these enemies who had taken their comrades' lives and take them prisoner anymore anyway, so the killing continued.

After rapid-marching for a whole 15 hours, Qi Long and the others finally managed to get back to the main camp. When the camp's medical officer saw Qi Long and the others carting in the unconscious Ling Lan, he hurriedly let them put Ling Lan into one of the healing pods for treatment.

"Luckily you lot came back in time. If you all were just an hour later, the healing pods might not be even be effective anymore." Seeing the information released by the

healing pod, the medical officer could not help but exclaim.

Qi Long asked anxiously, "How long does he need to be treated before he can wake up?"

"If just for waking up, perhaps about three days. However, to fully heal his body, he would most likely have to lie in the healing pod for up to 3 months." The medical officer was not exaggerating. In truth, Ling Lan's body was near the brink of collapse. There only remained a tendril of vitality left in her body, and this tiny tendril was what would power Ling Lan's recovery. If this tendril was utterly destroyed, then it would be useless even if Ling Lan laid in this healing pod for 10 years.

"Three months? That long?" The companions were struck with belated fear. They had known that Ling Lan had been injured badly, but they did not expect the injuries to be this severe.

"That long? Little fellows, you all should be grateful that it is only three months, and not no time at all," sighed the medical officer. Only kids like these would be bothered about the length of time needed for healing. For people like him who were used to seeing life and death, as long as there was a chance to lie down and receive treatment, it was a blessing no matter how long it took.

Every day the medical officer had to oversee countless patients coming and going, so after settling Ling Lan in, he did not pay any more attention to the matter. Meanwhile, Qi Long and the others came every day to the medical department to watch over the healing pod, waiting for Ling Lan to wake up.

The medical officer was very reliable; three days later, Ling Lan hazily woke up.

The others were thrilled, rushing to ask if Ling Lan needed anything.

Ling Lan shook her head at them. Little Four had told her everything that had happened after she lost consciousness, so she knew that Qi Long and the others were aware that she was the one operating the mecha. However, Ling Lan was very pleased with the clean-up that Han Jijyun had done. She had originally planned to do the same to destroy all evidence of the incident.

Meanwhile, at this time, this planet was finally fully back in the control of the Federation. They successfully killed all the invading Twilight warriors, though of course there were some mecha operators who had chosen to abandon their mecha

and flee on foot into the forest to hide, biding their time for an opportunity to counterattack.

With regards to those people, the Federation did not specially send out teams to clear them out. This was because once they entered F-class savage beast territory, those mecha operator without their mecha were really unlikely to be able to handle those savage beasts...

The rebuilding after the battle also commenced very quickly. The Federation delivered materials and resources in an endless stream to the planet. Some credit had to be given to the Twilight Empire for this — their invasion this time forced the Federation to publicize the coordinates of the mysterious planet and include it into the Federation's maps, where it was given the name 'planet Demonbeast'. This was because there was nothing other than endless savage beasts on the planet...

Half a month later, Qi Long and the others resumed their hunting assignment. Of course, every time they returned, they would not forget to give Ling Lan a share of their earnings. In this way, three more months passed. Ling Lan finally obtained the approval of the medical officer to leave the healing pod and could once again move around freely.

The first thing Ling Lan after regaining her mobility was to go eat. She was seriously starving — although nutrient solutions could replenish all the minerals and other elements needed by the body, her stomach, which was used to working for over 10 years, just could not help but feel hungry.

After she finished eating her fill, she looked up to find Qi Long and the others sitting beside her, waiting patiently.

"When did you guys arrive?" Ling Lan was startled. She had been too focused on eating that she had not noticed anything happening around her.

Of course, she also questioned Little Four inside her mind, asking him why he had not alerted her. Little Four was speechless — Boss was the one who said that these few people were on the list of people whose presence did not need to be announced. When had Boss changed her mind? Why did he not know about it?

"Not too long ago. Seeing Boss eating so happily, we're also very happy," replied Han Jijyun with a smile.

Ling Lan rubbed her brow helplessly and said sulkily, "Han Jijyun, just ask if you have a question, this sneaky look doesn't suit you." Han Jijyun's sudden change from a cool and serious scout into a warm and smiling gentleman just seemed really awkward to Ling Lan; she couldn't help but feel goosebumps rising all over her body.

"Here is not a suitable place," said Han Jijyun regretfully, keeping his smile as he looked around.

Due to the rebuilding spanning 3 months, many of the veteran soldiers all managed to obtain new weapons of their own. Thus, they were in a great mood, so it was easy to see tables after tables of rowdy celebrating soldiers.

Observing the situation around them, Ling Lan nodded and said, "True. Then let's go back to the dorms."

Ling Lan led Qi Long and the others back to their dorms. She then took a quick shower and changed into a new set of protective clothes before sitting at her usual spot. Then, she said, "Alright, ask if you have any questions. But, this is only for today." Ling Lan wasn't someone who liked to talk about herself, which was why she had dragged on so long in revealing to the others that her father was Ling Xiao.

Chapter 155

My Father Is Ling Xiao!

The group stared at one another, and Han Jijyun was the one who asked in the end, "Boss Lan, who are you really?"

Helplessly, Ling Lan rubbed at her forehead once more. In the end, she still could not avoid answering this question, but since she had chosen to be honest, she should really introduce herself properly. Thus, she answered seriously, "My name is definitely real. I am really called Ling Lan. My family background isn't fake as well, but, I just didn't tell you all who my young dad who passed away was."

"Boss Lan's father? Surname Ling? Sacrificed 10 years ago?" Qi Long muttered to himself as he thought.

All of them here were intelligent children. Almost immediately, an astounding yet sorrow-tinged name emerged in their minds. All of them could not help but stare at Ling Lan incredulously, "Ling Xiao?!"

Ling Lan nodded expressionlessly, indicating that their guess was not wrong.

"Ah..." Knowing that they had not guessed wrongly, Qi Long and the others couldn't help but exclaim. The shock of this answer was really too much for them.

It should be known that Ling Xiao was one of the twelve god-class operators of the Federation, as well as the only human being who had managed to successfully advance to god-class operator status at the young age of 24. Throughout human history, the youngest to advance to god-class operator status before Ling Xiao was a 33 year old mecha operator from the Caesar Empire. In one jump, Ling Xiao had raised the bar by a whole 8 years, proof of just how aberrant he was.

Thus, to the people of the Federation, Ling Xiao was a godlike existence. Although he died early in the end, having been killed in a plot by the Twilight Empire in the death tunnel, this did not stop the passionate soldiers and those children chasing their dreams from viewing him as their lifelong idol.

Moreover, Qi Long, Luo Lang, and the others had grown up within the federal military system. All along, Ling Xiao had been a figure often mentioned by their guardians, in tones wistful for what might have been. They even emphasized the fact that if Ling Xiao had lived, the Federation would have been able to hold complete deterrence ability over the other nations for the next 50 years, with no worry of border trouble. So, as they gradually grew up learning about Ling Xiao and his exploits, they also began viewing Ling Xiao as their own idol. They hoped that one day, they would be able to achieve everything Ling Xiao had achieved, and perhaps even go one step further to complete what Ling Xiao did not get to complete.

Right now, Qi Long and the others actually learned that their Boss Lan was the son of that aberrant genius, Ling Xiao, the people's idol. The lot of them were instantly stupefied by the news.

Ling Lan coughed empathically, shaking them from their stupor, before continuing to say, "Because my father died young, and also because his circumstance is a little special, it didn't seem very appropriate to talk about him."

"No wonder Boss is so good at operating mecha," sighed Han Jijyun softly, his entire body relaxing. He had actually been afraid that Ling Lan was from a major faction from within the military. If that was the case, their relationship would very easily drag their paternal families into an unnecessary faction feud, and this was something he did not want to see. If that happened, their friendship would certainly change, no longer able to stay pure and simple.

"Boss, could you teach us how to operate mecha?" The mecha maniac Qi Long's eyes were sparkling; he had really been fantasizing about this moment for so long.

Qi Long's suggestion stirred the hearts of the other boys as well. With faces filled with expectation, they looked at Ling Lan with stars in their eyes, hoping that she would agree.

"I cannot," Ling Lan refused resolutely.

She had secretly absorbed so much gene agent, and then trained both body and spirit repeatedly in the learning space and in reality. Besides that, she also had Little Four doing his best to keep the mecha in check, lowering the feedback energy to the absolute minimum. Under these circumstances, her body still received heavy damage. Not to mention, Qi Long and the others were children who had not been through

specialised training for mecha. Qi Long may still be fine, but the others' bodies just would not be able to support even two or three mecha movements.

Seeing their stubborn gazes, Ling Lan said sternly, "Because of our Ling family secret methods, that is why I can learn mecha a few years earlier. Even so, I still was not able to take the feedback energy of the mecha and was injured badly. What will support you all to learn mecha now? The Federation does not allow children to learn mecha before the age of 13 for a good reason. Don't play the fool with your lives."

Ling Lan was most afraid that these children would not listen to reason, secretly sneaking off to try and learn control on their own. This was no laughing matter — a misstep would easily end in disaster. They could even lose their lives.

Ling Lan's scolding words caused the boys to break out in cold sweat instantly. Because they had seen Ling Lan dispatching the three enemy ace mecha so efficiently, they had naturally assumed that they could also learn how to operate mecha, completely forgetting the repeated warnings of their own parents and instructors. It should be known that the reaction force from operating mecha was very powerful — even for adults, not everyone was suited for operating mecha.

"Even with our Ling family secret arts, my father never wished for me to operate a real mecha before I turned 13... if the situation hadn't been desperate, I too wouldn't have done it," said Ling Lan to Qi Long and the others. She had only operated the mecha because the situation forced her to.

Qi Long and the others were ashamed. They knew very well that Ling Lan had done all of it to save them. Otherwise, Ling Lan would not have left the outpost to look for them, and so would not have operated the mecha and ended up with a body covered in wounds.

They no longer felt the restlessness they had felt before, nodding to show they understood. Still, deep in their hearts, the seed of yearning to become ace operators had been planted. One day, those seeds would sprout and grow tall and strong.

The hunting course was not as long as Qi Long and the others thought it to be. After spending about half a year on planet Demonbeast, the academy finally sent a starship to collect them.

Initially, they had intended to take them back after the battle ended. However, due to the planet being invaded by Twilight Empire forces, the Federation had no choice but to reveal the existence of the planet to the public. This incited a great uproar within the Federation. The citizens were very unhappy about the Federation's concealment of this auxiliary planet, and had begun to organise large-scale demonstrations on various planets.

This caused the Federation government and the Federation military to become primarily reactive — they had to first focus on settling the commotion inside the nation. Therefore, they forcefully suppressed the request of the Central Scout Academy to retrieve its students. They were afraid that if the public found out that they had sent a batch of the Federation's most exceptional youths to the dangerous planet Demonbeast for training, the demonstrations would intensify.

Still, thanks to this, Ling Lan managed to avoid drawing attention and subsequent trouble from her injuries this time. If the Central Scout Academy had sent a military ship to retrieve them, then they would certainly have found out that their prized student had been seriously injured during this battle. Then, they would definitely have assigned a specialist medical team to treat Ling Lan. If that happened, the secret of Ling Lan's concealed gender might very well be exposed! (All the information the Central Scout Academy received was that out of the 50 students, there were 0 deaths, 0 missing, 21 injured, 29 unharmed, and that none of the students had any risk of dying.)

This was also why the Central Scout Academy was willing to wait. If there really had been any fatal injuries or casualties, the dean of the Central Scout Academy would likely have stormed into military headquarters and forcefully commandeered a starship to go pick up his students already.

Just like this, Ling Lan and company safely returned to the academy. After saying goodbye to her friends, Ling Lan hurried back to her villa.

At the garden gate to the villa, a lovely figure was peering out anxiously...

Ling Lan felt tears spring to her eyes, once again experiencing the bittersweet¹ feeling of having a relative worrying about her... she had almost forgotten what it was like.

"Mummy!" Ling Lan shouted the moment she was within sight of Lan Luofeng. Lan Luofeng rushed out at a supernatural speed, sweeping forwards like a gust of wind,

pulling Ling Lan into her arms.

"Ling Lan, you're really back! That's great! Mummy missed you so much." Lan Luofeng, who had always faced Ling Lan with a smile, actually had tears in her voice at this moment. This was a sign of just how much she had worried over this half a year.

Ling Lan abruptly realised that Lan Luofeng was still haunted by the shadow of her father's mysterious passing; perhaps she was afraid that Ling Lan too would disappear as Ling Xiao had. If Ling Xiao had taken away half of Lan Luofeng's soul, then the remaining half was undoubtedly tied to her. If she really passed away, Lan Luofeng would likely follow her into death without any hesitation. Losing her, Lan Luofeng would no longer have any soul left to keep her alive.

Ling Lan was unbelievably touched by Lan Luofeng's deep motherly love. She hugged Lan Luofeng back with all her might as tears fell silently from her eyes. "Mummy, I'm sorry for making you worry."

In her previous life, although her parents loved her, due to her illness, they were already slowly giving up on her. They gave most of their love to her younger brother, and the remaining love they had for her was slowly being worn away by the endless treatments and care she needed. Ling Lan did not blame them. This was a basic human instinct — to avoid the pain they saw coming, they voluntarily chose to slowly divert their love.

Thus, the death of Ling Lan in her previous life was actually a type of release for her parents and her brother. Of course there was sadness, but there was even more a sense of relief at finally laying a burden to rest.

The Ling Lan of this life had constantly been guarded with her affections, because she too was afraid of being hurt. Towards Lan Luofeng, she had deep respect and love, but not a lot of intimacy. Because she had taken over the body of Lan Luofeng's child, she needed to bear the responsibility. Her impression of Ling Xiao was mostly based on descriptions from Lan Luofeng. She had taken so long to tell Qi Long and the others that Ling Xiao was actually her father, in large part due to the fact that Ling Lan had never really registered that she was really Ling Xiao's child.

However, when Ling Lan personally felt the tremors running through Lan Luofeng's body right now — the physical manifestation of her deep-seated worries and fear, a reflection of that unnameable adoration of motherly love — the generous warmth of

it instantly wrapped around her entire body. Ling Lan could no longer hold back her brimming emotions, sincerely saying sorry to Lan Luofeng!

Only Ling Lan truly knew what this apology meant — it wasn't purely referring to this most recent injury, but was for her closed-off heart over these past ten years. She was sorry for not responding properly to Lan Luofeng's ten years of unstinting motherly love.

Perhaps Ling Lan's warm response surprised Lan Luofeng, for she quickly gathered herself and pulled away a little from Ling Lan. After looking her over carefully, she asked worriedly, "Ling Lan, are you alright?"

Ling Lan patted her chest and replied, "All is well. I can even put away 20 servings of steak with no problem." Fully accepting Lan Luofeng into her heart, Ling Lan once again recovered her previous composure and began to joke around light-heartedly with Lan Luofeng, smiling.

Chapter 156

Why Did You Die?

"That's good. Did you know? Your expression now is a little richer now than it was previously. Mummy can stop worrying now." Lan Luofeng patted Ling Lan's adorable shota face, satisfied, before pulling Ling Lan by the hand into the villa.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan's heart throbbed at Lan Luofeng's words — so Lan Luofeng had always been watching and observing all the changes she went through. The only reason why she never said anything was that Lan Luofeng chose to believe in her own child.

Perhaps only a mother who loved you fully would pay attention and notice all these minute changes. Lan Luofeng did not seem to care much for her academic results, and seemed not to worry about Ling Lan's future; in all appearances, not a responsible parent. However, looking closely, from birth till now, in the minor details of her life, anything or anyone who made Ling Lan feel uncomfortable would unknowingly disappear... this was definitely Lan Luofeng's doing — she could not bear to see her child suffer.

The more she felt Lan Luofeng's love, the more remorseful Ling Lan felt. She pressed down on Lan Luofeng's hand, drawing Lan Luofeng's questioning gaze.

Ling Lan smiled radiantly at Lan Luofeng and said, "Mummy, have I told you earlier that I love you?"

Lan Luofeng covered her mouth in pleasant surprise. Since she was little, Ling Lan had had a heavy burden on her shoulders, deeply pressured. While she was still an infant, she still liked to laugh and play pranks at times, but as she grew up, she became increasingly colder and began emanating an antisocial presence. This made Lan Luofeng's heart ache for her child, and she was also extremely regretful, wondering whether her initial decision had doomed Ling Lan.

Later on, Ling Lan had truly become the family head of the Ling family and took the responsibilities of the Ling family onto her shoulders. From then on, Ling Lan never liked to speak much. Of course, to get Ling Lan to speak more, Lan Luofeng had tried

pretending to be ditzy to cling to Ling Lan, trying to cajole Ling Lan into talking to her or to tell her 'I love you, mummy' and so on, but all she got in the end was just perfunctory responses. This had really made Lan Luofeng a little sad.

Now, seeing Ling Lan say this voluntarily, Lan Luofeng couldn't help but be overjoyed. She was very afraid that Ling Lan's spirit would be twisted because she had to pretend to be a boy, but seeing Ling Lan's sincere smile now and her slightly cheeky tone, all seemed well with Ling Lan. This was undoubtedly what Lan Luofeng was most happy to see.

"It's such a shame, Ling Lan, you really forgot to tell mummy this earlier," replied Lan Luofeng with a smile. Yet, two crystal tears fell from her eyes, and one coincidentally fell onto Ling Lan's palm.

Ling Lan stared at that warm tear in her palm, so warm that it seemed to sear, and then lifted her head to say again seriously, "Mummy, I love you! From now on I will take over Daddy's duty and tell you every day that I love you!"

"Ling Lan, Mummy loves you too!" Lan Luofeng hugged Ling Lan close once again. Eyes blurred with tears, she looked up at the sky and felt as if she could almost see Ling Xiao smiling at her and saying that he had found someone to love her in his place.

"Thank you, Ling Xiao, you've given me the most precious treasure, my Ling Lan!"

Ling Lan and Lan Luofeng ate a great meal in the villa as they talked and laughed. Ling Lan picked and chose some interesting stories from her time at planet Demonbeast to tell Lan Luofeng. Of course, she said nothing of her getting injured. Since she was now safely home, why bring up these things which would make her mum worry?

She then told Lan Luofeng about the followers she had gathered. Lan Luofeng was extremely interested to hear about them and immediately instructed Ling Lan to bring those followers of hers here tomorrow afternoon after classes ended, for her to inspect and to share a meal or something.

Ling Lan was instantly speechless. Inspect? What did her mum take her followers to be? However, when Ling Lan saw Lan Luofeng's disappointed expression and low spirits, she couldn't bear it and so could only nod and agree.

The moment she obtained the answer she wanted, Lan Luofeng instantly revived to full health, excitedly calling for Ling Nanyi to arrange tomorrow's dinner menu. Seeing

her mum so lively and energetic, Ling Lan was resigned yet happy as well. Even if this was a little troublesome, she felt that it was still tolerable. Ling Lan suddenly wondered — would her dad also lose to such an expression?

Thinking about it, it was entirely possible. Because Lan Luofeng's expression earlier was obviously well-practiced — it was definitely not the first time she had used it. And the only person who could let Lan Luofeng gain such experience, aside from her dad Ling Xiao, there was pretty much nobody else.

When housekeeper Ling Nanyi heard that Young Master Lan was inviting classmates over for dinner, she too was swept up in the excitement and immediately jumped into the discussion animatedly. Because this was the first time Ling Lan was inviting friends home... although this was just a temporary living area within the academy, it was still their temporary home, wasn't it?

Watching the two fretting women loudly discussing at the dining table, even going back and forth multiple times over a single dish on the menu, Ling Lan knew that she was unnecessary here. Resigned, she quietly left the dining hall and logged on to the virtual network. There, she contacted Qi Long and the others who were also online and arranged for them to come eat at her house. Only after that did she secretly slip into Ling Xiao's legacy space.

At the same time, Little Four created a fake Ling Lan to walk around the virtual world randomly, creating the illusion that Ling Lan was nowhere near the legacy space.

This time, the moment Ling Lan entered the legacy space, it was no longer as complicated as before. There were no tests; she immediately arrived at the Ling family mansion. Ling Lan took the familiar path to the study and pushed the door open to see Ling Xiao sitting behind the study desk. He was in the middle of writing something, and when he heard the noise of Ling Lan entering, he lifted his head. Seeing Ling Lan, he smiled warmly and said, "Ling Lan, you've come?"

He immediately followed up by saying, "Looks like you've already met the requirements needed to receive the next part of the legacy. In that case, show me." That said, he brushed his hand lightly over the surface of the table and six translucent crystal beads appeared.

Ling Lan did not look at the crystal beads on the table, only keeping her eyes trained steadily on Ling Xiao's face. That face with such a warm and kind smile on it — the last time she saw it, she did not feel much resentment, but this time, seeing it again, a surge of negative emotion rose in her heart. She wished she could just leap forward and punch the smile off that face.

During this time, Ling Lan had already learned a lot more about god-class operators. She knew very well that they were near-godlike beings and definitely did not die easily. Even if the energy turbulence in the death tunnel back then had been overly terrifying, that did not mean that Ling Xiao could not escape. Just looking at a god-class operator's horrifying speed which was close to lightspeed, escape was not impossible.

What was it that made Ling Xiao willing to abandon Lan Luofeng and herself to choose death?

"Why did you die?" Ling Lan bit out word by word, voicing the doubt in her mind.

Ling Xiao was taken aback, as if unprepared for Ling Lan to ask this question.

"I ask you, why did you choose to die?" yelled Ling Lan with mingled grief and rage. Lan Luofeng was such a perfect woman — how could Ling Xiao bear to make her sad? He should know that without him, Lan Luofeng would lose her happiness — even if she had a child, she would still lose the vibrancy and colour she should have had...

Ling Xiao smiled bitterly, his aura still so warm and calm that he seemed beyond reproach. "I am a soldier. I cannot refuse the military's commands! Besides, I have never thought of dying. I really wished I could have lived..."

After a brief moment of silence, Ling Xiao continued, "I don't know whether I am dead when you entered this legacy space. But I can tell you with certainty that I would not choose to kill myself, and I would not leave things to fate. If there is any hope of survival, no matter how difficult things may be, I will persevere and fight with all my strength to obtain it."

"If that is the case, why are you still dead?" Ling Xiao was a god-class operator! Could it be that that magnetic field energy turbulence still had some hidden story behind it that even Ling Xiao had no way of piloting his god-class mecha to leave?

"I do not know. I just sensed danger! After achieving a certain level of strength, one

obtains the ability to predict danger. Which is why I prepared a legacy space beforehand. This was to be my last resort. It doesn't mean I am truly dead..." Ling Xiao's smile slowly faded, "Of course, it is also possible that I am really dead!" Ling Xiao's aura exploded — only now did Ling Lan sense how terrifying the spiritual pressure of a god-class operator was.

Luckily, the press of Ling Xiao's aura came and went. But just that brief taste of it was enough to drench Ling Lan in sweat. In that moment, she had even had the wrongful feeling that she would die under its pressure.

"Originally, we had wanted to settle things once and for all. We were going to locate the greatest parasite hidden within the Federation. But unexpectedly, that parasite was deeper and higher up in rank than we had anticipated. It was very likely that the opponent saw through our plans and so set up a counterplan. It was a loss by just one move; there was no shame in losing. You just need to be careful, for the opponent may very likely try to end things by killing out my line." Ling Xiao revealed just a little of the information back then. "Of course, I have also made some arrangements. If those people do not go against their word, perhaps you will be able to grow up in peace and also obtain my legacy."

At this point of his recitation, Ling Xiao snorted and said, "When a man dies and the lights go out, whether those people are still willing to take the risk for me, no one knows. This is not something I can control. So Ling Lan, you must remember. No one is reliable — the most reliable thing is to become strong yourself. Besides that, intelligence is also something you cannot lack. If I, Ling Xiao, am truly dead, at the heart of it, I must have died by the opponent's plot."

Ling Lan did not expect that Ling Xiao had long thought of this and had also made the appropriate arrangements. It was just that in the end, things must still have happened outside of Ling Xiao's expectations, causing all of Ling Xiao's plans to be useless.

These words of Ling Xiao caused the negative emotions in Ling Lan's heart to slowly melt away. It was just as Ling Xiao said — this was not something he could control.

She walked forward and swept her hand over the surface of the desk. The six crystal beads instantly disappeared. Subsequently, four beads appeared in the gaps of Ling Lan's fingers, while two more rested in her palm.

Ling Xiao nodded lightly. Just that last move alone showed that Ling Lan's speed had

already reached his minimum requirement.

Ling Lan did not look at Ling Xiao's expression. Her fingers folded and began dancing swiftly. Then, layer after layer of afterimages of Ling Lan's fingers appeared, and countless clear sounds of collision started to ring — ding ding dang dang¹, extremely pleasant to the ear. Gradually, these tinkling sounds became powerful ringing, reverberating like stormy winds and driving rain, an endless assault. It was clear to see that Ling Lan's hand speed had already reached a significantly terrifying speed.

Chapter 157

Innate Talent Awakens!

Ling Xiao's gaze was filled with satisfaction. This speed of Ling Lan's had indeed met his requirement, and was actually a hair better than what he required. Just as Ling Xiao was going to say that she had passed, the ringing sounds of the crystal beads colliding sped up even more, merging the separate noises into one collective consistent peal of sound. Meanwhile, at this time, Ling Lan's fingers had disappeared...

Seeing this, the expression of the initially smiling Ling Xiao shifted. If he weren't afraid of disturbing Ling Lan's attention, he might have just yelled out in shock. Ling Lan's hand speed had actually reached the step of Void — this was a definite step into the standard requirement to become an ace mecha operator. His child should be no more than 10 years old... right?

With a dull 'puff', Ling Lan's fingers stopped and she woke up from the state of Void she had been in. Her brows furrowed lightly, and she opened her palm. Inside it were still four crystal beads, but now there was also a little powder.

"Clap clap clap..." Ling Lan heard the sound of applause coming from beside her. She lifted her head to look and saw Ling Xiao clapping sedately. He smiled and said, "Ling Lan, very good. You've actually reached the state of Void."

"Void?" asked Ling Lan, puzzled. Ling Lan had learned mecha training exercises on her own, other than those things taught by the instructors in the learning space. Therefore, no one had explained the relevant standards to her. Little Four should have been the one to gather this information for her, but Little Four was under the mistaken belief that his boss only needed to learn the techniques of Mandora, and so had neglected this front.

Ling Xiao seemed to be prepared for this. Hearing Ling Lan's question, he explained, "The hand speed for mecha control is split into 5 stages. Base, representing the foundational speed — most mecha operators in training and low-level mecha operators are within the range of this level. Diligence, the next stage after Base — typically putting in hard effort will be enough to bring one up to this level. Intermediate mecha warriors belong at this level. Apex, representing the advanced

mecha warriors — this means that one's hand speed has already reached the standard limits of the human body. Shade, a stage belonging to special-class operators — of course, a part of those here could also advance into novice ace operators. Meanwhile, Void was the standard by which operators were judged to be ace operators or not... originally, my requirement was for you to achieve Apex speed, but unexpectedly, you've given me such a great surprise from the start."

Ling Lan listened closely to Ling Xiao's explanation, then after a pensive silence, she asked, "After Void, is there a higher speed? And also..." Both of Ling Lan's eyes focused on Ling Xiao, "What is your speed?"

Ling Xiao was silent for a long moment, but then he said, "Above Void is Form... but, that's still a long way away yet for you. You don't have to know about it now." Ling Xiao only mentioned a title, but did not go into the specifics.

"And you?" Ling Lan doggedly continued to ask. The second question was the one she was more concerned about.

Ling Xiao looked placidly at Ling Lan, and Ling Lan looked back unflinchingly at Ling Xiao. Her gaze was filled with the message that she would not back off on this.

Ling Xiao sighed deeply. "My hand speed is Space..." His tone was somewhat fond, as if a little resigned at his child's stubborn personality.

"That's the highest speed, right?" said Ling Lan decisively. Otherwise Ling Xiao would not have become a god-class operator.

Ling Xiao shook his head and said, "No one knows where the true limits of the human body are. Space may be the limit right now, but is it really the ultimate limit? No one is able to foretell the future with absolute certainty..." Ling Xiao's gaze was somewhat vacant, as if reminiscing about something.

Thoughtful, Ling Lan nodded. In her previous life, she had never even considered that humans could be this strong. Just looking at the physical body alone, human strength in this world was over ten times greater than it was in her previous world... For instance, the extraordinarily strong men of her previous world, would only match up to the strength of a 10 year old child here. It was clear to see that in these ten thousand years, humans had made countless breakthroughs in the so-called human limits.

Ling Xiao abruptly came to himself, and sensing that Ling Lan had no more questions,

he continued to say, "Since you've already met my requirements, then the second part of the legacy is yours now."

That said, Ling Xiao waved a hand in Ling Lan's direction, and Ling Lan instantly felt a large surge of energy push her out. And then, she was falling rapidly, just as if plummeting uncontrollably from the sky.

Ling Lan's complexion was extremely pale. Even though she had already conquered her fear of heights after a period of bitter training, still, when faced with this sort of uncontrolled free-falling, she felt all the hairs on her head stand on end. If not for the fact that she was certain that her cheapskate dad Ling Xiao had no bad intentions towards her, she would certainly have started screaming by now. But even so, she was so scared that her body was drenched with cold sweat.

Ling Lan fell into a grey-coloured area. Mist covered everything, hiding the surroundings from her eyes. Just when Ling Lan was wondering what to do, countless information and precious images were crammed into her brain... numbers, movements, formulas, experience — in short, everything that Ling Xiao had learned, from control intuition, battle experience, and all sorts of miscellaneous insight were shoved unceremoniously into Ling Lan's little head.

"Once you've absorbed all this, come find me again then..." In a daze, Ling Lan heard this final statement by Ling Xiao, and then fainted dead away...

Oh, but before fainting, Ling Lan at least remembered to point a savage middle finger at her old man. Hells, this legacy was just way too tyrannical! It was truly over the top!

Meanwhile, Ling Xiao thought: What a tenacious child! Luofeng, you raised her well!

When Ling Lan woke up again, it was already the morning of the next day. She climbed out from the virtual logon pod, and cradling her head, she shuffled to her bedroom to get some proper rest. Of course, this drew the concern of Lan Luofeng. However, Lan Luofeng still chose to believe in her child, thinking that Ling Lan had everything well in hand.

After a good sleep, along with Little Four's help, she managed to seal away anything currently inapplicable into the depths of her brain, thus clearing up a great portion of her overloaded brain. Only then did she have the space to continue processing. This is

when Ling Lan found that, in the second part of Ling Xiao's legacy, the most important bit was the training and control of spiritual power. Moreover, this was the key for an ace operator to advance to imperial status.

Most notably, after turning 10 years old, mutations may occur in a child's spiritual power... this would influence the developmental path of the child.

"Little Four, do you know anything about this spiritual deviation?" Ling Lan suddenly realised that she was currently at this crucial moment.

"This is how this world refers to it, but according to the studies of our Mandora star system, this is an inevitable manifestation. After 10 years of age, humans start to step onto the course where their various functions gradually mature ¹. The initially slowly developing spiritual power enters a period of rapid growth, starting to awaken the innate talents within the body at the same time. This type of spiritual awakening combined with the stirring of the dormant talents are what this world calls spiritual mutation," Little Four reported all the information he found on their studies of the subject.

"If so, then spiritual mutation is a good thing." Ling Lan was instantly reassured.

"Of course it's a good thing, but it may not definitely be a good thing." Little Four's words made Ling Lan frown. So was this a good thing or a bad thing at the end of the day?

"It depends on what the awakened talent is. Not every talent is suitable for operating mecha."

"Oh? How so?" Ling Lan was curious.

"Some innate talents, like Decadent Voice, Soaring Dance, Conquering Smile..." Little Four began laying out the information he had gathered.

"Be detailed when talking about the talents. Just saying the name, what can I know?" Ling Lan glared fiercely at Little Four, dissatisfied with his laziness.

Little Four rolled his eyes. Something so easy to understand, yet his boss wanted to make things complicated. He pouted and said, "It's actually very easy to figure out. For Decadent Voice, the awakened talent affects the voice. It makes the bearer's voice attract people's attention without them noticing it, even able to make them drunk on

it. Meanwhile, Soaring Dance is a type of body language, able to make people feel what it is conveying, as if they were in a dream or an illusion. Conquering Smile is even easier to understand. One smile conquers cities, another smile conquers countries, a third smile conquers galaxies... hehehe, in fact, Boss, you have talent in this area." Little Four started giggling behind his little hands. Naturally, he was then captured by an angry and embarrassed Ling Lan for some domestic violence...

With great difficulty, Little Four finally managed to escape Ling Lan's demon clasp, and whined, "How violent, I can't even speak the truth anymore..." Seeing Ling Lan's pointed glare, he quickly clammed up and stopped joking around. Pulling on a straight face, he continued to say, "Those talents earlier are more suited for the entertainment industry. Many of the world's popular singers, dancers, and performers are all people with awakened talents in these areas."

"For instance, that evolved spectre hacker we met a few years ago was also due to a type of talent awakening. It's just that his awakened talent is destructive strength on the virtual side." Little Four raised another familiar example to clarify things for Ling Lan.

In the end, Little Four glanced at Ling Lan and said teasingly, "Actually, Boss, your innate talent is already awakened."

"What?!" exclaimed Ling Lan, "Why didn't I know of this?"

"Haven't you noticed, Boss? Isn't your ability to see through an opponent's weakness with a glance very miraculous?" Little Four pursed his lips, looking down on his boss for being so slow.

Ling Lan was enlightened. No wonder every time she fought she would see through the opponent's weakness straightaway. Even when she was on planet Demonbeast, fighting with the Twilight Empire mecha, she also had this feeling. That was why she had been able to successfully come up with a strategy on the fly, and make the opponents act as she willed so that she could finally kill them.

"Boss, this is your innate talent! It's just that Boss's innate talent still hasn't awakened completely. You still need to work on it. Right, Boss's number two follower (the number one follower is him, Little Four, the others are all after him), that one called Qi Long — that so-called animal-like instinct of his is also a type of talent awakening..." Little Four continued with the revelations.

"So Qi Long has also awakened his talent!" exclaimed Ling Lan in astonishment. Suddenly, tone puzzled, she said, "That's not right. Qi Long already had his animal instinct since young. Didn't you say that innate talents could only be awakened after 10 years old?"

"Silly Boss. Talented children can naturally awaken their innate talents earlier. Like you, Boss, and Qi Long, are both this type. Still, early awakening is relatively uncommon. Most children only begin awakening from 10 years old onwards. And even if the talents are awakened early, they won't be noticed unless the changes are extremely obvious. Like yours, Boss, and Qi Long's covert type of awakened talent, it is not obvious at all and will be easily overlooked... Before I said anything, didn't you yourself not notice anything, Boss?" said Little Four disdainfully.

Chapter 158

The Instructors of the Learning Space Assemble!

Ling Lan could only rub her nose and accept Little Four's contemptuous glares. Who asked her to be a real dimwit when it came to things like this? In future, she would still need Little Four to explain things to her. Ling Lan knew well that she could not use pure force on Little Four all the time — when appropriate, she should let him have his fun, so that he would put in even more effort in future to provide information of this sort.

It had to be admitted that Ling Lan herself was actually pretty black-bellied at times. Let us surrender some compassionate tears for the clueless Little Four in advance!

In fact, the spiritual power training method passed down by Ling Xiao's legacy was extremely reasonable. Even Little Four, who had N-amount of materials saved in his databases, could not help but have an intense light in his eyes at seeing these systematic training methods. While Ling Lan was not looking, he swiftly made a digital duplicate of the material in his hands, which then vanished instantly after without a trace. Who knows where he sent it to...

In a particular exclusive space within the learning space, below the dark and gloomy skies, there was a towering mountain peak. At its highest point, there was a flat cloud platform. Number One was sitting there in solitude, eyes closed as he meditated. Suddenly, his brows lifted and he reached out a hand in a quick grab, and a file appeared just like that out of thin air into his hand.

Only then did Instructor Number One open his eyes and start flipping casually through the file. Then, his expression abruptly turned grim, and his cold voice thundered throughout the entire space. "Assemble!"

His voice had just dissipated when in that gloomy patch of sky, about 10 metres or so above the area Number One was meditating, eight dark vertical lines suddenly appeared.

Subsequently, those vertical lines grew thicker and thicker, and then they actually split open from the middle, and the first thing that came to sight was a pair of hands in each line. After that, the hands forcefully ripped those black seams apart, revealing the figures they were attached to. They were the instructors of the learning space, from Number Two to Number Nine, all eight of them with no absentees.

The seemingly simple and honest Instructor Number Three laughed heartily and said, "Big Brother, what has happened, actually calling us to assemble?"

Number Five's eyes narrowed slightly, and a harmless smile emerged on his handsome face. "It must be something big, but who knows if it can make me excited..." That said, he licked at his lips, his demeanour one of profound interest. Speaking of which, ever since little Ling Lan had graduated from his tutelage, he had felt as if life had lost all meaning, he no longer had any desire or motivation to do anything...

Number Four was a sexy great beauty. Even dressed in compact military clothes, her sexy curves and buxom figure were still clear enough to cause massive nosebleeds in men — oh, the allure of a woman in uniform...

She sighed and said grumpily, "I only care about when I can debut... I really want to teach our family's Baby Lan!"

Number Nine sniffed coolly, "Ling Lan has no need to learn those things of yours..."

Number Four smirked and shook her hands, "No, no, no. Sister Nine, don't be so sure. Baby Lan will still need a man someday. When that time comes, she will need everything of mine. I will let her master all the methods she needs to control everything of a man's..."

Number Nine was about to retort when she seemed to recall something, and so held back and said nothing...

Number Six, Number Seven, and Number Eight were triplets, all male. They all looked to be around 25 to 26 years old, faces attractive and masculine, the type that would easily inspire trust in others. The three looked exactly the same. At a glance, it was impossible to tell one from another. They looked balefully at their big brother Number One, their gazes just short of directly complaining to their big brother — why didn't he let them go out and teach their baby disciple?

Number One seemed unable to withstand the wronged-wife look ¹ coming from three

identical handsome faces at the same time, for he coughed and said, "Before Ling Lan has decided her future developmental pathway, you all just have no way of coming out..."

Who asked the three of them to be specialists in specific areas? Number Six was a whiz at anything to do with finance and investments, Number Seven was a master at administration and management, while Number Eight was an expert at military planning, strategy, and tactics. They were obviously respectively a money bag, a major-domo, and a military advisor. If Ling Lan had decided to conquer the world, the three of them would have appeared much earlier, but Ling Lan was still somewhat unsure about her future plans, so they could only keep waiting...

"Eh? Where's Number Two?" Number Four suddenly recalled that there was still Number Two who shared their sad fate, not being able to debut as well. Could it be that Number Two, unlike them, did not want to interact with their Baby Lan?

Everyone abruptly realised that Number Two who had come here with them had actually disappeared...

Number One coolly thrust the document in his hands behind him, saying calmly, "Number Two, take a look at this document."

The shadow of Number One's right hand suddenly moved, stretching up to take the document from Number One's hands. The moment the document left Number One's hands, it became a shadow too, returning to join Number One's shadow, merging seamlessly into it.

Watching this scene, everyone present felt a chill invade their hearts. However, they all seemed to have some resistance built up against this creepy shadow play — most of them just shifted a little, but then stood steady and pretended not to see anything.

Very soon, the dark shadow spoke, "A very perfect set of spiritual power training methods, even safer and steadier than the triggering method that our Mandora star system has to awaken innate talents. Compared to this method, our measures are clearly a little violent." The shadow's voice was hoarse and ragged, somewhat grating on the ears, making anyone who heard it feel uncomfortable.

"It's really that good?" Number Five's eyes finally sparked with some interest. His voice had barely faded when a copy of the document sprang out from the shadow and

flew straight at Number Five.

Number Five caught it deftly and began browsing through it. His gaze flickered and he sighed in awe, "So that's how it is. This way, the effect of awakening the innate talents will be doubled with just half the effort. This is a good lesson, I'll need to see how I can integrate this with my Hell Training..."

Number Nine grabbed the document from him, and sniffed coldly. "Don't ruin this great thing..."

Number Five just smiled without retorting, and did not try to take the document back either. Frankly, as beings made from data, they could clearly know all the content within the document just by touching it; browsing through it was just a habit they had.

Everyone took their turn to take a look, and they each had their respective insights. Spiritual power training had a certain boosting function upon high-intelligence bio-entities like themselves. Or should we say, every one of them obtained differing types of insights applicable to their own domain — this was beneficial to their evolution.

"Who'd have thought that we would one day receive a present from our host..." sighed Number Four. Her words caused everyone to fall silent. Due to the bindings of the rules, they would have to repay their host for the gift. However, at present, it was rather difficult to repay their host properly, because this was not the Mandora star system. Without the relevant technology, they could not materialize...

"This matter, let's leave it till later. There will be a chance somehow." Number One closed the issue for now, in wait for a future opportunity. For this reason, at some time in the future, Number Six, Number Seven, and Number Eight would be working hard to develop the technology of this world, fighting to hasten the arrival of the day they could materialize.

Instructor Number One considered for a moment, and then said to Number Two, "Number Two, it's time for you to debut."

"Yes, Number One!" said Number Two darkly. This time, he had once again changed his manner of speaking. Being voiced by the shadow, the entire scene was made dark and eerie.

This sort of supernatural atmosphere displeased the other instructors. They all put

forth their protest for Number Two to change his image so that he would not frighten their beloved Baby Lan.

Their protests were only met by Number Two's gruesome, cold chuckles. The entire space was filled with the hair-raising sound of his laughter, and then the entire space suddenly dimmed. Dark winds rose on four sides, a ghostly chill swirling into the air, and nameless will-o'-the-wisps fluttered in the distance... it was as if they had abruptly been plunged into the abyss of hell.

Other than Number One who still remained expressionless, as unmoving as a mountain, the others, even the extremely perverse Number Five, could no longer hold onto their smiles. At this time, Number Two said faintly, "If Ling Lan could endure Number Five's torments, then I think she should not be afraid of me... me... me..." His voice echoed endlessly within this space...

At these words, Number Five instantly became the focus of everyone's anger as they vented their fear on him. They glared fiercely at Number Five, wanting him to fix things with the gaslighting ² Number Two... Number Nine, in particular, huffed coldly, her expression one of great displeasure. If Number One had not been there, she would definitely have challenged Number Five to a fight. Mind you, since a long while back, she had already wanted to give Number Five a good beating on behalf of their adorable Baby Lan.

Facing the crowd's anger, Number Five could only smile stiffly. With regards to Number Two, no matter how perverse Number Five was, he did not dare to push Number Two too far. That fellow was extremely proficient at spiritual manipulation, and was good at concealing himself. If he angered him by accident, he would definitely be greatly brutalized by the other. Number Five was a sadist, not a masochist.

Besides, towards Ling Lan, he really had no evil intentions. Why couldn't these companions beside him understand this? It should be known that their soft namby-pamby methods would never be able to cultivate an unparalleled prodigy — it could only be said that a genius was always lonely and misunderstood...

Number Five cravenly pretended to be lost in the silence of his own genius and swiftly departed!

Ling Lan did not know yet that her good days were over. Very soon, she would be greeted by yet another wave of the learning space's torments. Currently, she was anxiously standing at the entrance to her villa, waiting for the arrival of Qi Long and the others. Not just them, even the other members of group 072 were coming, as well as the new addition Lin Zhong-qing.

This was the first time Ling Lan was receiving a visit from classmates in both her lifetimes. Even the typically calm Ling Lan could no longer keep her calm in this moment; she was actually quite nervous.

"Boss Lan, we're here!" This voice was most certainly that of the loudmouth Qi Long. Ling Lan walked out of her little garden, and immediately saw a group of children dressed in red uniforms and white uniforms about 100 metres away. The fellow right in the front waving wildly at her was none other than the brash and forthright Qi Long.

Right behind him, a girl was also waving just as vigorously. It was the candid, tomboyish Han Xuya. Meanwhile, Luo Chao was closely tailing Han Xuya, tugging on the other's sleeve with a red face, trying to remind Han Xuya to be more reserved.

Yuan Youyun, Luo Shaoyun, He Chaoyang, and Li Jinghong were looking at Ling Lan with faces filled with excitement. They looked as if they really wanted to greet her but was unsure whether they should. Ever since Ling Lan and the others had gone to planet Demonbeast to hunt, they had not seen them for as long as half a year.

Chapter 159

Take a Wife or Marry a Husband?

Speaking of the four of them, they were now all students of Special Class-B. In particular, He Chaoyang and Li Jinghong, due to their weaker talent, had worked themselves to the bone just to chase up to Ling Lan and the other elites. After four years of tenacious struggling, they finally managed an upset to squeeze into the competitive ranks of Special Class-B. Becoming classmates with Yuan Youyun, Luo Shaoyun, Han Xuya, and Luo Chao, the six of them successfully built their own team, becoming team members who would grow together. To commemorate group 072 where they had taken the exam together, they named their team '072'!

Most surprisingly, the team leader of team 072 was actually the easily embarrassed, shy and often blushing Luo Chao... it was true enough that people could not be judged by their appearances.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan's team had been short of one person all this time. Ling Lan was unconcerned by this, so Qi Long and the others also did not worry.

Behind Yuan Youyun and the others were Han Jijyun, Luo Lang, and Lin Zhong-qing. Although they were restraining their excitement on the surface, their gazes revealed their true emotions. In contrast to the ignorance of the others, Qi Long and the other three knew the true meaning of this visit — this would be the first time they would encounter the world of god-class operator Ling Xiao, especially the wife mentioned in the legends of Ling Xiao. (That's my mum! ← Ling Lan was moody; these bunch of followers were actually ignoring her...)

The group nervously followed Ling Lan into the villa, and then saw a beautiful lady smiling gently at them. Of course, in this time period, beautiful men and women were everywhere, but still, the children could feel a warmth coming from Lan Luofeng's body, easing their initially high-strung nerves.

The half-grown kids greeted Mama Ling politely and bashfully. This greatly pleased Lan Luofeng, because her Ling Lan always had a serious adult-like expression on her face, giving her no sense of achievement as a mother. But now, she could finally have a taste of what it felt like... Boo hoo hoo, if only her own daughter was as lively as these

children before her eyes...

The intent behind Lan Luofeng's gaze rendered Ling Lan speechless — how had her mum come to the conclusion that these kids were lively? Setting everything else aside, just looking at Han Jijyun alone — that stern expression of his was not much better than hers...

All that could be said was that parents would never be satisfied with the current situation. They would always admire the things that their child has yet to accomplish, regardless of whether it was apt or not.

In a great mood, Lan Luofeng's demeanour was naturally very welcoming to the children. In comparison with their fierce dragon mums at home, the children could not help but admire Boss Lan's blissful life. It was once again proven that the grass was always greener on the other side.

During the meal, Ling Lan observed her mum's formidable diplomatic methods for the first time. Without any notable signs, she managed to coax out the family backgrounds of all ten children by beating around the bush. Of course, not everyone was oblivious — Han Jijyun noticed, but he was not surprised by it. This was an expected measure by any responsible mother to understand the friendships of her child. Han Jijyun had already been mentally prepared for this, and so was the one to handle the subtle interrogation the best.

Lan Luofeng looked at the children before her with extreme satisfaction. It had been a really long time since the house was this lively; her child finally had her own friends now... who knows which of them would become the right one for her daughter¹?

That one called Qi Long had a good personality, very obedient, not bad not bad; but then that one called Luo Lang was just so pretty, she liked him by just looking at him (Lan Luofeng was a certified face-con); that Han Jijyun was a bit stern, but he was very clever and handled things in a very organized manner, seeming to match well with her daughter... and that Lin Zhong-qing, although his family background was a bit weaker, he knew how to compromise and seemed adaptable, and would most certainly do well in the future, also a good choice. What a shame she only had one daughter...

In short, Lan Luofeng was extremely satisfied and pleased with all the boys here in front of her; she had actually already begun debating with herself over which one was the best choice.

These impure thoughts of Lan Luofeng were quickly seen through by Ling Lan, and cold sweat sprang out from her forehead. Oh mum, can you stop looking at my friends as if you are looking at your future son-in-law? Your daughter is only 10 right now, okay? And most importantly, right now your daughter is still male...

Just like that, under Lan Luofeng's special ministrations, the dinner table was a lively affair for both host and guest. The atmosphere was friendly, and the children soon lost their initial reservations.

Of course, there was also an exception. Luo Chao was the only one at the dining table with her head bowed, only eating the white rice in her bowl, not even daring to lift up her chopsticks to get any of the other dishes. Watching her, Ling Lan wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Was this little girl going to eat only white rice till the end?

"Hey, eat more Duomo meat ². Your body is too weak." Ling Lan's seat was diagonally across from Luo Chao. She picked up a piece of white meat with her chopsticks and placed it into Luo Chao's bowl. The shy and adorable Luo Chao's gentleness melted Ling Lan's heart... In truth, because Luo Chao's spiritual power increased at a greater rate than average, her body condition had always been a little unwell. This struck a chord with Ling Lan, bringing up memories of her past life, so she would always pay a little more attention and care to Luo Chao.

"Thank you, Big Brother Lan!" Luo Chao's entire face flushed red, and her eyes were glistening like those of a baby deer. Ling Lan pulled back her chopsticks speechlessly. Oh, little girl, big sister is only concerned about your body; there really isn't any deeper meaning... perhaps she needed to tone down this type of involuntary care a little in the future.

This action of Ling Lan's caused the initially lively dinner table to suddenly fall silent. Qi Long, especially, was gaping, extremely shocked at Boss Lan's sudden kindness in caring for Luo Chao. Meanwhile, Luo Lang's expression was conflicted — should he push away his boss to safeguard his little sister, or should he just go with the flow... The others kept stealing glances at Ling Lan and Luo Chao — could it be that without them knowing, Boss and their little sister had developed some relationship?

Only Han Jijyun remained composed, as if unaffected. Unfortunately, his chopsticks slipped a few times, unable to pick up the dishes he wanted. From that, it could be seen that he currently was not as calm as his appearance would suggest...

Ling Lan swept an exasperated glare at the group of brats with varying expressions on their face. This glare frightened the kids so much they hurriedly pulled their rice bowls close and began gulping down the white grains. Boo hoo hoo, as expected, they had no right to be nosy about Boss's business... what a waste of all the delicious food on the table — they now did not even dare to reach out to take any!

Lan Luofeng's originally decorous and demure smile suddenly froze, and her gaze became somewhat unfocused. Could it be that these boys all had no chance? Would she obtain a daughter-in-law in the end instead? No, that's not right, she gave birth to a daughter, right?

At the end, the evening ended and the group dispersed. The children left Ling Lan's home satisfied. The fact that Ling Lan had invited them to be guests at her home proved that Ling Lan had truly accepted them. This was the main reason for their satisfaction with this visit.

All said, they finally succeeded in hugging onto a big thigh... er, that is to say, they have finally become Boss Lan's sworn siblings!

Lan Luofeng waited impatiently for Ling Lan to return from sending her friends off, and then she pulled Ling Lan close and asked anxiously, "Baby Lan, do you like boys or girls?" Whenever Lan Luofeng was in a panicked state, she would default to calling Ling Lan 'Baby Lan'.

Ling Lan secretly rolled her eyes in exasperation — she's still a 10 year old child right now, okay? Isn't it a bit too early for her mum to be worrying about this?

"You still remember that you didn't give birth to a boy, right?" Big sister here is female in both body and soul — how could I like girls?

"Then what's going on with that Luo Chao?" Lan Luofeng still could not let it go. Even she had rarely ever gotten such caring treatment from her Baby Lan... alright, so Lan Luofeng was a little bit jealous!

"Don't you think she's really sweet? So much cuter than that bunch of smelly brats..." replied Ling Lan, "I like this kind of little sister!"

Seeing Lan Luofeng's stricken face, Ling Lan added on helplessly, "Purely as an elder brother towards a younger sister. Mum, don't overthink it."

That said, Ling Lan ran away! Leaving behind a petrified Lan Luofeng.

And then, in the vast and vacant great hall, a hysterical cry rang out:

"AHAHAH... Nanyi, I'm going to go insane!" Lan Luofeng pulled at her hair wildly; at this moment, she no longer retained any of her so-called decorum.

A knife in hand, Ling Nanyi rushed out from the kitchen in shock, "Mistress, what happened?"

"Boo hoo hoo, Nanyi, Baby Lan has really started thinking of herself as a boy... what should we do now?" Lan Luofeng's mind was echoing with the phrase 'purely as an elder brother towards a younger sister'... That 'younger sister' was most definitely referring to Luo Chao, then wouldn't the 'elder brother' be referring to Ling Lan herself?

Hearing this, Ling Nanyi's expression calmed down. "This is how it should be, otherwise Young Master Lan would not be able to pull off the role so well."

"But, I don't want to have a daughter-in-law in future, I want a son-in-law..." said Lan Luofeng in distress.

"Don't worry, Mistress. Even if Young Master Lan takes a young mistress, with the current technology, it will still be possible for the young mistress to give birth to Young Master Lan's child..." Ling Nanyi's eyes were shining, starting to consider the possibilities along this avenue — where she could go to obtain excellent sperm, and then let Young Master Lan's and the young mistress's eggs combine to take the sperm and merge so that a pair of twins could be born... Of course, only Young Master Lan's child could be considered as family head for the Ling family. As for the young mistress's child, they would just be trained up as a loyalist to accompany Young Master Lan's child...

Listening to Housekeeper Ling Nanyi's counsel, Lan Luofeng felt that it made sense. After all, no matter whether her daughter took a wife or married a husband, it would not affect her getting grandchildren. Thus, her mood brightened, no longer conflicted.

Ling Lan, who had barely turned the corner, heard this conversation between her mum and the housekeeper, and was instantly rendered speechless. What was up with these people... she really could not think on the same wavelength as them.

However, Ling Lan did not take this matter to heart. She was still only 10 years old — whether she would marry a wife or husband, the choice was still very far off. Right now, she might as well make full use of her time to get stronger instead. Might was the true right!

Time passed swiftly, three years went by just like that! In these three years, Ling Lan grew from a short little bean sprout into a stately and well-proportioned, aloof youth. Compared to three years ago, Ling Lan's current status within Special Class-A of Year 4738 was also extremely noteworthy. Even the influential types like Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie could only turn their blades away, full-heartedly acknowledging Ling Lan as the only boss of Class-A.

In reality, these three years were not as pleasant for Ling Lan as everyone assumed. By day, her authority was indeed unchallenged, but by night, she was thoroughly living a tragedy. Within the learning space, she was going through countless torments, being bullied endlessly by Instructor Number Two.

Chapter 160

A Grand Game?

Still, Instructor Number Two was not as crazy as Instructor Number Five. Of all the countless ways he could use to torment Ling Lan, he only used the simplest of them, but it was still enough to frighten Ling Lan to within an inch of her life during every training session with him.

Who knew where Instructor Number Two obtained his intel? (Little Four was cackling smugly; of course the info came from him.) He brought the ghost movies and horror films of Ling Lan's previous world to life. Ling Lan had thought that after Instructor Number Five's perverse torments, she was already immune to any other torments, but who knew she still had a weakness... actually being terrified of those illusionary ghosts and spirits.

These eldritch ghosts had no form, so physical attacks were useless against them. Many times, Ling Lan found her own sword turned against herself by these ghosts to disembowel herself or stab out her own heart, where she then breathed her last without being able to do anything. This greatly frustrated Ling Lan — she had never felt so helpless before. At least during Instructor Number Five's insane training, she had not been completely unable to fight back.

From the start, Instructor Number Two had not told her what she should do. Every time she entered the learning space, she would be thrown directly into all sorts of horror films to train, putting Ling Lan through time after time of unending terror. Ling Lan finally knew what a so-called endless trial was now... it was truly unbearable.

In the course of dying five or six times, Ling Lan had tried countless ways, finally grasping the use of spiritual sensing to kind of sense the existence of those eldritch ghosts. And so she began to focus on training with the spiritual power training methods bequeathed to her by her father, trying to use her spiritual power to fight these ghosts in these horror films... Only at this time did Instructor Number Two appear to instruct Ling Lan on how to pull out her spiritual power and teach her the way to divide it.

This extraction and fragmentation of spiritual power was agonizing — every time,

Ling Lan would go through the suffering of having her spiritual power being forcefully ripped apart. This was much more painful and much more unbearable than the feeling of her physical body being torn apart — every time, Ling Lan would only barely succeed after she started puking from the pain. If it weren't for the fact that she did not want to die in myriad strange ways, Ling Lan would have lost all courage to even attempt a second time.

Still, this inhuman torment had significant results. Ling Lan's original one cord of spiritual power split into two cords, and then the two cords split into three cords, and so on until she finally succeeded in splitting out 12 cords of spiritual feelers. In Instructor Number Two's words, she had succeeded in becoming an initiate level spiritual power user. Of course, from the moment Ling Lan succeeded in extracting and projecting her formless spiritual power, this meant that she now had the ability to defend against those formless spirits, giving her the possibility of survival in those endless horror film scenarios.

In these three years, Ling Lan had pretty much lived through all the horror films in her previous world. From the start when she could only defend passively, till the point when she could finally fight back, to now where she could kill her way through the sea of ghosts — these three years caused Ling Lan to grow up very quickly! This method of Instructor Number Two's which forced Ling Lan to reincarnate repetitively caused Ling Lan to master the various uses of spiritual power in a very short amount of time. Ling Lan even managed to invent several spiritual power attacks of her own...

Regarding this, Instructor Number Two could only exclaim in silence at how aberrant Ling Lan's tolerance was. Consequently, he further increased the difficulty — in several attacks in some scenes, he took part personally... and so Ling Lan once again experienced the sensation of dying at ghostly hands, welcoming yet a new round of evolution.

Due to the endless pressure of terror, Ling Lan's innate talent awakened at a much faster rate than other people. Not only did her Profound Insight talent awaken completely so she could now use it as she willed, she even awakened a second innate talent — Ice Affinity, which allowed Ling Lan to learn the element of ice. This caused Ling Lan's body to emit a faint chill, and in tandem with her cold and expressionless ice-block face, a new generation cold-faced pretty boy came into the world!

The awakening of Ice Affinity not only took Ling Lan by surprise; the instructors of the learning space were also very surprised. Ling Lan's body clearly was not born with the

element of ice, so why did this innate talent awaken? Later on, Instructor Number One made an irresponsible guess — perhaps because in her heart Ling Lan believed that cold-mannered slackfaced people were all good, while those who liked to smile were a black-bellied lot full of bad water, so the element of ice had become fond of her...

Wasn't this just ridiculous? Look well, this was what is meant by an irresponsible guess!

Ling Lan truly shocked and surprised everyone with the awakening of her innate talents. The awakening of the innate talents of others would always show some sign, whether big or small — for instance, Qi Long's Animal Instinct had presented young and just became more and more obvious. During this period of time, his initiate instructor mentored him for a full year, letting him fully master Animal Instinct. He was now especially sensitive to those who tried to get close to him, directly being able to intuit their true intentions... he was just like a human lie detector. Moreover, under his instructor's invitation, Qi Long also officially became his true disciple...

Han Jijyun's awakened innate talent was Strategy, an enhanced version of intelligence. This would definitely aid him in becoming a perfect intelligence-type staff officer.

In comparison, Luo Lang's awakened innate talent was rather unexpected — Alter Ego! When his innate talent activated, it would automatically create a new personality — this personality could be passionate, or heartless, or wrathful, or cold-blooded... once, it even presented the personality of a ruthless fighting machine. At that time, both his attacks and his tactics were extremely scary, because Luo Lang had become so cold-blooded that he would even risk himself in his calculations...

Whenever Luo Lang's innate talent activated, Qi Long would become extremely agitated, because only Qi Long's Animal Instinct could tell whether Luo Lang's new personality was good or bad. If it were a bad personality, the group would pounce on Luo Lang to control him, to prevent him from doing anything unforgivable. It was truly an undeniably dangerous innate talent to awaken! Of course, this type of uncontrollable innate talent like Luo Lang's was pretty much half-useless... without Qi Long there, if a bad personality presented, no one would know. These personalities were all able to fake normalcy, so only Qi Long's Animal Instinct could detect it as its natural counter. Of course, this was also true of Ling Lan's Profound Insight, but no one knew about this innate talent of Ling Lan's. Everyone just assumed that Ling Lan's awakened talent was Ice Affinity.

Both Han Jijyun and Luo Lang had also been taken in by their instructor as true disciples; this was especially imperative for Luo Lang. His dangerous innate talent gave his instructor no choice but to seek help from his sect, hoping they would be able to think of a good way to resolve this latent threat of Luo Lang's.

Of course, both Qi Long and Luo Lang's talents were suitable for operating mecha, but compared to the relatively unstable Alter Ego, Animal Instinct was undoubtedly a level better.

Lin Zhong-qing's awakened innate talent was Concealment. When it was activated, his presence would vanish without a trace. As Ling Lan would say, he was a person very suited to become an assassin.

Han Xuya's awakened innate talent was Violence. Once it activated, her combat strength would multiply by several folds. This was also a low-level innate talent very suitable for mecha operation. Everyone lamented that this innate talent was wasted on Han Xuya, causing Han Xuya to fly into a rage and demand a PK¹ from them with her talent activated. Then, this strongwoman would beat them into the ground with her abominable strength... it was clear to see that the talent of Violence was very helpful in terms of providing combat strength.

The most unique talent was Luo Chao's. Initially, everyone thought that the shy and pacifist Luo Chao would awaken some type of lifestyle related innate talent, such as Favourable Impression, or Voice Control etcetera... But surprisingly, she actually awakened Navigator, which was very rare among females. This meant that Luo Chao would become an excellent starship captain in the future.

Yuan Youyun's awakened talent was Energy Reservation, most suitable for drawn out battles, while Luo Shaoyun's was Berserker, the complete opposite of Yuan Youyun's. Luo Shaoyun's talent lent itself well to a quick-paced battle, where he could just rain a torrent of blows down on the opponent to crush them, and was not good for a drawn out battle. He Chaoyang awakened Phantasm, while Li Jinghong awakened Thousand Li² Astral Projection. Both these innate talents were not really combat-suited and were extremely common. Still, the two boys were very happy, because many of the other students in their class did not even awaken any innate talent at all. In other words, they did not undergo a spiritual mutation.

Some of the awakened talents of the members of the two teams were counters of each other or very similar, so the two teams often PK-ed among themselves. The

relationship between the members increased steeply till they were all bosom buddies, however, they all also knew that some of them would be leaving once they turned 16. This was because the paths they would walk in the future were divergent.

Everyone also knew that the youngest little sister Luo Chao had a crush on Boss Lan, but Boss Lan did not seem to reciprocate... he treated Luo Chao exactly the same as he treated them all. They felt that this was a bit of a shame, for they were actually very willing to leave the adorable little sister Luo Chao in Boss Lan's hands.

One day, Ling Lan was studying some class materials on the virtual network when she suddenly heard her communicator ring blaringly.

Ling Lan glanced down and saw with some surprise that it was Luo Lang. Normally, either Qi Long or Han Jijyun would be the one to contact her; it was extremely rare for Luo Lang to do so. Why was this fellow contacting her...? Curious, Ling Lan connected the call and asked, "Luo Lang, what's up?"

"Boss, come to the academy canteen quickly! Qi Long is going up against some tenth grade students... the other side has over about 20 people!" Luo Lang's tone was anxious. Qi Long was indeed very strong, but against so many people, his pair of fists would still be unlikely to defeat the opponents' horde of fists.

"Calm down. What happened?" asked Ling Lan calmly.

"A female student from Class-B accidentally bumped into the other, and an argument broke out. One of the girls on the other side actually slapped the Class-B student several times. We just happened to be in the area, and Han Xuya could not overlook it and so went out to defend the student. Boss, you know how hot-tempered Han Xuya is. After some bickering back and forth, they almost wanted to hit Han Xuya as well, so Qi Long stepped out. And then twenty students suddenly emerged from their side to surround Qi Long, demanding that Qi Long kneel down and apologise! They also said they wanted to teach us arrogant juniors ³ a lesson..." Luo Lang detailed the entire stream of events to Ling Lan.

"Got it. I'll be there at once! Also, delay for as long as possible!" After giving these instructions to Luo Lang, Ling Lan hung up. After some thought, she immediately contacted Wu Jiong, "Wu Jiong, notify all the students of Class-A and Class-B to gather

at the academy canteen!"

"Uh? Okay!" Wu Jiong was stunned for a moment, but immediately agreed and then asked, "What's going on? Why do the students of both classes need to go there?"

A sly smile appeared on Ling Lan's lips, "Do you want to play a grand game with me?"

"A grand game?" Wu Jiong's interest perked up instantly.

"I'm very curious... what the 'grand armed melee' which has disappeared from the academy for over a hundred years is like..." Ling Lan's smirk was sinister. At this moment, she seemed to be channelling a faint shadow of Instructor Number Five.

"A grand armed melee!" yelled Wu Jiong in shock. He was drenched in cold sweat in an instant.

"What? You don't dare to play with me?" Ling Lan's tone seemed mocking, but sounded more like the seductive tone of a demon.

Wu Jiong felt his heart pounding violently, his mind filled with the idea of a grand armed melee... He gulped audibly, swallowing a mouthful of saliva then said, "Fine, I'll play with you! Who's the opponent?"

Chapter 161

Grand Armed Melee!

"10th graders! They've long been unable to stand the sight of us 7th graders, and are now bullying the girl from Class-B to taunt us..." After hearing what Luo Lang had to report, Ling Lan could tell that this was definitely a show of strength by the 10th graders to try and put them in their place.

"10th graders... Boss Lan, you sure enough are the boss. I, Wu Jiong, give in to you completely!" Wu Jiong had initially thought it was just going to be a grand armed melee with the 8th graders, but who would have expected that Ling Lan would just go for the challenge with the greatest difficulty, directly going head to head with the highest-ranking 10th graders. Wu Jiong folded completely to this sort of courage.

"Wu Jiong, I heard that there are very few people in Class-B that experienced a spiritual mutation, and even in Class-A, a little less than half had no obvious changes?" said Ling Lan, changing the topic.

Wu Jiong's mood dipped. "Yes, over these few years, there are less and less students experiencing spiritual mutations. If they don't mutate before they turn 16, they will very likely lose the possibility of operating mecha..." Even if someone who did not undergo a spiritual mutation operated mecha, they would never be able to go beyond intermediate mecha warrior status. Therefore, when they applied for the various large military schools after they turned 16 years old, those schools would never accept these children into their mecha classes.

"Sometimes, a cruel battle will spur someone to evolve and have a breakthrough... the grand armed melee is such an opportunity." Ling Lan vaguely revealed the reason why she wanted to have this grand armed melee.

Wu Jiong's eyes brightened, and his admiration for Ling Lan deepened. He immediately tapped his chest and said, "Boss Lan, don't worry. I will inform all our classmates in the special classes..."

Wu Jiong's popularity was very high within their grade; he had a good relationship with every team. So, if the students within the grade had any problems, they normally

liked to look for Wu Jiong for help. Only if Wu Jiong was not able to help would they carefully approach Ling Lan for assistance.

It could not be helped. Although Ling Lan never got angry, her cold and austere face, along with the faint chill emanating from her body and her indifferent stare, all made them hesitant to approach her. As the children grew older, the better they became at gauging strength levels. Ling Lan's capabilities had obviously gone far beyond the range of a scout student, causing the children to feel pressured naturally — they even felt that facing Ling Lan was scarier than facing their instructors.

This was also why Ling Lan tasked Wu Jiong to inform the other students — who asked him to be so popular? Of course, Ling Lan really did not know anyone else's contact number other than Wu Jiong's. So, even if she wanted to notify the other students personally, she had no way to do it.

After settling everything, Ling Lan logged off the virtual world, put on her jet-rollers, and swiftly left her villa.

Ling Lan had just risen into the air on her jet-rollers when she saw quite a few students of Class-A gliding out from their villas on their jet-rollers as well.

"Boss Lan!" Everyone stopped, greeting her with clear idolisation. If Qi Long was said to be the number 1 fighter of Year 4738, and Wu Jiong was the central pillar, then Ling Lan was their unmoveable mountain ¹, proving just how steady and reliable she was in their eyes.

"Hn. Has everyone arrived?" Ling Lan halted as well, hovering in the air, and in less than a minute, over 30 odd students had gathered around her.

"Pretty much. Some have already gone ahead," replied one of the students, "While some are still on their way."

"Then let's go!" said Ling Lan calmly. With that, the jets on both sides of her jet-rollers shot out a stream of air, activating instantly, driving her towards the canteen of the academy's upper division.

"Move out!" The students behind her shouted, and the 30 odd students collectively followed Ling Lan on their jet-rollers.

At this moment, inside the academy upper division's canteen, a gang of red-clad

youths of 15 to 16 years old — whether standing or sitting, or leaning and supporting — were casually but surely cordoning off an area with their bodies. On one side inside this circle of people, someone was seated unabashedly on a chair. Opposite him stood a slightly younger red-clad youth, while several boys and girls of the same age stood behind him, dressed in either red or white.

"What, Qi Long, you want to take responsibility for this matter?" said one of the 10th grade Class-A students standing at the side, sneering.

Qi Long grinned good-naturedly and said, "Senior, no matter how the incident started, you've already managed to hit and scold — isn't it time to stop?" Qi Long was not really afraid, but if the situation continued to degenerate and they actually began fighting, the few Class-B female students here would certainly be harmed. He had initially stepped in just so he could prevent them from getting hurt.

"Qi Long, how dare you! Actually speaking to a senior in that tone?!" That person was infuriated by Qi Long's barbed words, immediately leaping out to berate him loudly.

"Senior, you think too much!" A slight trace of a mocking smile appeared on Qi Long's lips. By now, of course he could tell that the other side had intended to make a big deal out of this matter from the very start. They were planning to give these 7th graders who had just entered the upper division ² a show of force to put them in their place!

"Qi Long! You..." This attitude of Qi Long thoroughly enraged the 10th grader. Was this really how a student who had just entered the upper division should act? Thinking back on when they themselves had first moved up and had been hazed by their seniors, their attitude had been extremely respectful and humble. Why was it that now that it was their turn to haze their juniors, they just had to meet this kind of disrespectful and insolent prick?

"Qi Long, don't be too arrogant now! Although you are the number one of the 7th grade, in our eyes, you're nothing..." spat out the leader, expression dark and foreboding, "If we want to play around with you, it would just be like toying with a pitiful worm... know your place! Kneel down to me and apologise!"

"Kneel!"

"Kneel!"

"Kneel!"

Cry after cry demanding Qi Long kneel echoed within the academy canteen. The 10th grade students were now united against a common enemy, putting all their pressure on Qi Long, who they saw as the head of the 7th graders.

All of the 8th and 9th grade students stayed in their corners, not daring to make a sound. This was a scene that would occur every year, where the 10th graders of the upper grades would exert pressure to put the newly advanced 7th graders in their place. This was just the beginning — once the other 7th graders appeared, they would also be given the same treatment... When they had been in the 7th grade, they too had endured the same — that feeling was really absolutely horrible. But this was just how things worked in the upper division... whoever had the larger fist would be the one with authority!

Here, no instructors would interfere in this type of bullying or scuffles. It should be said that once students entered the upper division, they were already considered as students who could graduate. The academy had taught them all it could, and everything beyond this was for the students themselves to figure out on their own. Therefore, this area had become a microcosm of the adult world, a world where might was supreme and logic was irrelevant. This was also why this incident of the 10th graders hazing the 7th graders would occur every year. It had become a sort of dark legacy. The humiliation they had endured at the beginning would be taken out of the hides of their juniors now.

So, even if the 7th grade students here now were once the elite of the intermediate division, within the upper division, they should first learn how to walk with their tails between their legs!

"Hehehehe... kneel? My boss told me that men can only die standing, and cannot live kneeling!" The smile on Qi Long's face had vanished completely. He could compromise, but he would not lose his dignity and his pride.

"In that case, then I really would like to see how tough your bones really are, Qi Long!" The moment the leader of the 10th graders said this, 7 or 8 people stepped out from the crowd, rubbing their palms and clenching their fists in preparation to mob Qi Long.

Seeing this, Qi Long immediately got into a defensive stance. He harrumphed coldly and said, "I too would like to know how capable you seniors really are to get me, Qi Long, to submit..."

"That's right! I, Luo Lang, would also like to see!" Luo Lang knew there was no longer any way to delay, so he also stepped forward to stand beside Qi Long. His fists were raised, ready to put up a good fight against these people.

Han Xuya clenched her fists fiercely and shouted, "And me too! Dammit, I'm not afraid of these bastards!" Men who bullied women and those weaker than themselves were the worst, and these 10th grade seniors had committed both those sins — her hate against them was at the max.

Facing this situation of being surrounded on all sides, Luo Chao's complexion was pale with shock and fear, but she still stood her ground resolutely, supporting the injured female student without retreating a single step. She would never forget what Boss Lan had said to her — you can be afraid or panicked, but you cannot retreat and run away!

"What an insolent fellow. Just a 7th grade top rank and he thinks the whole academy is his to rule?" The 10th grade students began to jeer — the more they saw this kind of backbone, the more they wanted to destroy it. They themselves had not managed to stand up for themselves back when they were hazed, what gave these 7th graders the right to do so?

"Teach him a lesson!"

"Teach him!"

"Teach him!"

The 10th grade students were insistent on putting the 7th graders in their place; the entire canteen was filled with raucous cries urging for a beatdown.

"Since you 10th grade seniors want so much to teach us 7th graders a lesson, then we 7th grade students shall collectively accept your challenge!" An icy voice rang out from the doors to the canteen.

Qi Long turned his head in surprise and joy and saw that familiar figure in the lead. He shouted, "Boss, you're here!"

A large group of students in red uniforms marched into the canteen, and at the fore was Ling Lan!

Seeing so many 7th graders appear all of a sudden, the expression of the leader of the

10th graders shifted minutely. "Could it be that you 7th graders want to revolt?"

"Revolt? In my opinion, fighting you all doesn't deserve the use of this term!" Ling Lan's words caused the 10th grade students to break into an uproar. Hells, this gang of 7th graders just kept coming out with more and more insolent punks! Looks like it wouldn't do not to teach them a good lesson!

"Since you all want to fight so much, then as you wish, we 7th graders challenge you 10th graders to a grand armed melee!"

"Grand armed melee?" The 10th grade students were somewhat confused. And then, as if suddenly recalling something, the leader yelled out, "You're insane!"

He looked at the number of students beside Ling Lan and instantly let out a sigh of relief. "No, you all can't possibly succeed in requesting a grand armed melee. With just this number of people, it's impossible..."

To be approved, a grand armed melee required 95% approval out of the total 100 students ³ of the Special Class-A and Special Class-B in the grade.

"No, you heard right, we're officially challenging you 10th graders to a grand armed melee!" Another voice rang out from behind Ling Lan. It turned out that Wu Jiong had also rushed over with a group of students at his back, most of them Class-B students in white uniforms.

Wu Jiong was late because he had been busy contacting the Class-B people. As a grand armed melee required 95% approval from the combined students of Special Class-A and Special Class-B to pass, Wu Jiong had discussed the issue with the Class-B teams in advance and had finally reached a consensus.

"You're all insane, insane!" The 10th grade students all had fear on their faces. They had only wanted to scare the 7th graders and put them in their place — they definitely did not want to unleash that horrifying grand armed melee... that was just asking for someone to die!

Chapter 162

Fighting For Honour!

In the most recent hundred years, there had not been a single grand armed melee. This was because the event was much too bloody and cruel, involving all the students of two grades in a large-scale group melee! During that time, no one would be able to control themselves — terror, rage, submission, humiliation... there were all sorts of elements that could cause someone to lose control. A massive number of casualties had been recorded for a grand armed melee in the past — this was another important reason why the grand armed melee had faded away into obscurity for up to a hundred years.

Of course, the moment the words 'grand armed melee' were said, not only were the 10th graders taken aback, even the 7th graders present, like those Class-A students who had come with Ling Lan, were all gobsmacked as well. They had only been notified that a 7th grade Class-B female student had been bullied by a 10th grade senior, and had only rushed here to lend a hand and show support. They had never expected their leaders Ling Lan and Wu Jiong to immediately escalate the issue to such an extent.

However, their blood could not help but boil with excitement — if the 'grand armed melee' of 100 years back which made all students turn pale at its mere mention were to reappear at their hands... that would be so goddamn amazing!

"Big Brother Xu, they don't have enough people, only 89..." One of the 10th grade students quietly reminded their leader to not panic. This was very likely a scare tactic by the 7th graders; they should not trip themselves up because of this.

At this reminder, this Big Brother Xu took a closer look and found that it was as that student said and calmed down. Indeed, who would be so stupid as to play the fool with their own lives — a grand armed melee? Even if they really wanted to try it, they wouldn't dare to fight one against the 10th graders, right? Wasn't this just suicidal? These little brats were definitely just trying to scare them, wanting to get them to surrender without putting up a fight. They must not fall for this threat and undermine their own authority! Thus, the leader laughed long and loud, "Hahaha... that's

hilarious! Actually daring to suggest a grand armed melee against us. Alright, I'll play with you all. Let's see if you all can really gather the full 95 people needed to successfully initiate a grand armed melee!"

Originally, there was some disturbance among the 10th graders at the mention of a grand armed melee, but after some internal discussion, the 10th graders had quickly settled down. Now, hearing their leader speak out, they all began chiming in as well, "Yeah, we're waiting..."

"Such a fun event, how can you leave me, Li Yingjie, out!" A flippant and prideful voice rang out from the doorway. Ling Lan and Wu Jiong couldn't help but sweatdrop — this punk Li Yingjie just loved to show off, extremely egotistical.

However, the arrival of Li Yingjie's team showed that the three strongest teams of Year 4738 were working hand in hand. Meanwhile, at this very moment, the number of 7th graders present had reached exactly 95 people. If everyone here chose to agree, they would have the minimum quorum required to initiate a grand armed melee.

"Classmates, since entering the upper division, you all must have felt the suppression from the upper grades. Be it by a little or a lot, quite a number of people have suffered. Boss Ling Lan has said before that people should possess backbones — we should rather die standing than live being forced to kneel. Because this is our dignity, our pride — once lost, then we will be unqualified to be soldiers... and what are we scouts? The cradle to cultivate qualified soldiers. What do you say? In this situation, can we submit?" proclaimed Wu Jiong loudly.

"No!"

"No!"

"No!" The rage of the 7th grade students was stirred up by Wu Jiong's words; they all shouted their defiance loudly with clenched fists.

"Shall we take up weapons to defend our own honour? To let everyone know that, although we are new members of the upper division, we will not allow ourselves to be scorned!" Wu Jiong continued to fan the flames.

"Grand armed melee!" Heaven knows who hollered it out, and then all the other 7th graders took up the chant, "Grand armed melee! Grand armed melee! Grand armed melee!"

Only by initiating a grand armed melee would the 7th graders prove their right to stand on equal footing with the 10th graders, through a fair fight.

"Then let us initiate a grand armed melee!" Wu Jiong raised his right hand, revealing his communicator, and put up the grand armed melee against the 10th graders for a vote.

Simultaneously, all the 7th grade special class students received the options of 'agree/disagree' to initiate the grand armed melee. Everyone present resolutely clicked on 'agree'. Even those 7th grade special class students who had not yet made it to the scene also received this selection notification from their communicators at the same time.

A white-clad youth lying down on the grass in front of one of the dormitory villas suddenly felt his wrist vibrate. Bored, he listlessly opened the notification and when he saw the contents, he instantly leapt up. "Grand armed melee? Haha, how interesting! Who'd have expected the Class-A people to have such guts? I need to go watch the fun!" The initiator had to be one of the top 5 of Class-A — although he did not know who it was, he still decisively clicked on the button to agree. Then, with a stamp of his feet, he disappeared from the patch of grass!

"Grand armed melee against the 10th grade — 7th grade special class approval at 97 people. This number exceeds the minimum requirement. The grade grand armed melee is officially established!"

Spread out at all corners of the academy, all the 7th grade students, whether they were from the special classes, the merit classes, or the regular classes, received this news on their communicators at the same time. This caused the 7th graders to jump in shock¹...

And then, all the alarms in the academy started to blare, going on for a whole 3 minutes! Everyone was flushed out from all corners of the academy by these warning alarms. They began asking the people beside them what was going on, but unfortunately, other than the 7th graders and a small number of the upper grade students, most of the students were clueless, so there was no clear answer to be found.

Right then, a female voice with a faint mechanical tone rang out above the academy:

"Warning, one hour later, a grand armed melee between the 7th grade and the 10th grade will officially begin. Duration is set for 24 hours. All students not involved with the grand armed melee please note, please enter the dormitory area quickly within this 1 hour. For 7th grade and 10th grade students who refuse to participate in the grand armed melee, please enter the dormitory area as well! One hour later, the dormitory area will go into full lockdown, becoming the only safe area during the grand armed melee. No one shall fight within the safe area; violators will receive heavy punishment!"

The academy's warning announcement was repeated three times. All the students of the academy were instantly in an uproar — some lower grade students did not even know what a grand armed melee was, and were quickly looking it up along with all other relevant information on their communicators. When they found out how cruel a grand armed melee was, some children's faces had turned deathly pale.

Very quickly, a recording was played on the academy loudspeakers. It was the speech that Wu Jiong had given to the special class students in the canteen:

"Classmates, since entering the upper division, you all must have felt the suppression from the upper grades. Be it by a little or a lot, quite a number of people have suffered. Boss Ling Lan has said before that people should possess backbones — we should rather die standing than live being forced to kneel.

"Shall we take up weapons to defend our own honour? To let everyone know that, although we are new members of the upper division, we will not allow ourselves to be scorned!"

...

"Grand armed melee! Grand armed melee! Grand armed melee!"

In the end, the students were collectively bellowing for a grand armed melee. This infected all the students of the academy, especially those 7th grade students of the merit classes and the regular classes. During this period of time, they had all suffered the suppression of the upper grades. All the humiliation they had been forced to endure all this time, abruptly exploded in this moment.

Grand armed melee! This was a chance for revenge gifted to them by the special class students! They silently clenched their fists tightly. Even if they died, they would pull

those seniors who had bullied them down into hell along with them!

"The assembly point for the 7th grade — Sunmoon Square in the district-N! The assembly point for the 10th grade — Freedom Plaza in district-E!" Finally, the academy mainframe gave the two grades their respective assembly points, and everyone began to move. In contrast with the 7th grade's repressed and focused fighting spirit, the 10th grade students were obviously somewhat panicked and unbridled...

"Bastards! That bunch of 7th graders are most definitely lunatics!" A majority of the 10th grade students had the same opinion. Otherwise, how would they be so berserk as to initiate a grand armed melee?

On the other hand, the 8th grade and 9th grade students were all puzzled, astounded at the sheer guts of the newly advanced 7th graders. They would rather start a savage grand armed melee rather than submit and compromise, and subject themselves to the bullying of the upper grades... could it be that the upper division would be turned on its head?

Some of them were even vaguely regretful — if only they had suggested a grand armed melee like the 7th grade now when they had been hazed by the 10th graders back then... would they have become different? Maybe even stronger?

In the dining room of the instructors, the instructors had initially been quietly eating their meals. Today, our esteemed dean was also eating in the dining room.

Just as he was enjoying his meal, the academy alarms suddenly sounded throughout the academy. In his fright, the dean actually spewed out the food he had in his mouth right then. He abruptly stood up and yelled, "What's going on?!"

Could the mainframe have shorted? Or was someone actually stupid enough to attack the scout academy?

The dean's wrist communicator began vibrating forcefully. The moment he connected, the captain of the ace mecha team guarding the school appeared on the screen. "Dean, what happened?"

"I was just about to ask you. Could it be that outsiders have invaded the academy's

airspace again?" The dean recalled the incident with Ling Lan seven years ago. That Ling family had been so brazen as to fly a mecha straight into the academy's airspace, giving them quite a scare.

"No, we used radar to scan the surroundings. Everything's normal. No unidentified objects have approached the academy. Could it be that there's an internal problem?" The mecha captain reported their findings to the dean.

"Understood. Be prepared to act on your end, I'll check with the school mainframe..." The dean had yet to finish speaking when the voice of the mainframe rang out in the dining room:

"Warning, one hour later, a grand armed melee between the 7th grade and the 10th grade will officially begin. Duration is set for 24 hours..."

"Grand armed melee? F*ck, why did this hundred year old relic appear again?" All the teachers looked at one another. Even they had not experienced a grand armed melee before, having only heard its name, so they did not really know how bloody or scary a grand armed melee could be.

"Heavens, which bastard initiated this?" The dean's complexion changed drastically as he leapt up in shock. He had actually seen those top secret files before. Every time there was a grand armed melee, the children would indeed develop rapidly, however, the casualty rate was just too shocking. Therefore, the dean of every generation would take precautions against a grand armed melee happening. They would rather the children develop steadily instead of using this kind of cruel method to force their growth. This was yet another reason why the grand armed melee had disappeared for over a hundred years.

The dean connected to the mainframe and pulled up the video of the location where the grand armed melee had been initiated.

The large screen right at the front of the dining room suddenly lighted up, and then the scene of a confrontation was played. Two sides were facing each other — Ling Lan, Qi Long, Wu Jiong, etcetera were all displayed clearly, not a single person was excluded...

"Godd*mn! Basically all the 7th grade special class members are there!" Seeing the 7th grade special class so united, all the instructors had approval in their gazes. This made

them think of their comrades who had fought by their side through battles of life and death...

Good good good! As expected of his offspring! The dean stared at Ling Lan's figure and could not help but suck in a sharp breath. The dean was truly an old fox — just by looking at the standing positions of the 7th grade students, he could tell who the orchestrator of this grand armed melee was.

Chapter 163

The Grand Armed Melee Begins!

Although the dean was fearful and angry, he could not help but be heartened by how influential his old friend's descendant was. Still, he quickly collected his thoughts and emotions, and bellowed at the gobsmacked teachers frozen in their seats in the dining hall, "Are you all still eating?! Get a move on!"

"Ah..." The teachers were stunned silly once more by the dean's ferocity. Who knew that the normally gentle and mild-mannered dean would have such a violent side to him?

"The rules relevant to the grand armed melee will be transmitted to your communicators by the mainframe in a moment," said the dean frantically, "Everyone be on guard at your positions and monitor every inch of the academy grounds. Keep a lookout for the rescue signals sent by the mainframe — at critical moments, put your backs into saving people!" When the flames were lapping at one's brows ¹, even the most mild-mannered person would be sent off the edge. If a massive number of casualties really occurred, even he would not be able to hold the fort.

"Yes, Dean!" The teachers finally woke up. The moment the grand armed melee began, their responsibilities would not be easy. They would have to keep the situation under control, and at critical moments, they would have to morph into omnipotent superhumans to rescue students.

"Dammit, what a real bunch of troublesome and reckless fellows..." The teachers may complain, but not a single one of them was really displeased by this turn of events. The 7th grade teachers, in particular, could barely hide their glee, drawing the admiration of the teachers of the other grades. How had they managed to inspire such guts in their students?

On the other hand, the teachers of the 10th grade were somewhat solemn. They had initially thought that their students were decent enough, but compared to the current 7th grade, they could feel how lacking the students they had taught were.

The teachers swiftly left the dining hall. In the now empty dining hall, like taking off a

mask, the dean's expression changed completely. His initially angry and impatient expression disappeared, and his lips actually curved upwards in a suspicious arc, showing just how good his mood was.

"Perhaps, these children will be the Federation's future..." The circumspect and farsighted dean knew very well what the current children were lacking.

"A grand armed melee... what opportune timing! Ling Xiao, if your son wasn't just fooling around and planned this on purpose, then he is truly impressive..." If the boy had truly noticed this point and intentionally launched a grand armed melee to give the children an opportunity to awaken, then that meant that Ling Lan was not just a simple warrior, but a strategist as well. If he continued to develop his skills, it would not be impossible for him to become a legendary marshal.

Blood and combat were the true fertile soil to cultivate real strength! With the passing of the years, old men like them gradually eased up on the younger generation out of compassion. They would rather choose those safer teaching methods than let the children face danger. But in truth, in the past hundred years, the number of people who had managed to advance to higher-class operator was obviously pitifully small compared to that of the previous century. Even taking the unparalleled prodigy Ling Xiao into consideration was not enough to blot out this fact. Although the educational methods of 100 years ago were bloody and cruel, exceptional top-notch operators were produced generation after generation in an endless stream... The status the Federation enjoyed now was fought for and earned by the batches after batches of top-notch operators produced then.

The dean naturally knew the flaw in their education system now, but he still lacked the conviction to force the start of a grand armed melee... Unexpectedly, that bunch of 7th grade special class students had helped him to make the decision this year.

At Sunmoon Square of District-N, Ling Lan and the others had already rushed over to the scene. At this moment, the academy's transportation robots had already brought over bundles after bundles of rubber bats and had piled them up inside Sunmoon Square. The same thing had happened over at Freedom Plaza where the 10th graders were.

Everyone who was involved in the grand armed melee, whether on the side of the

challenger or the challenged, had all received the rules relevant to the grand armed melee. In this grand armed melee, they would only have one weapon — these rubber bats. If any other weapon was discovered to be used, the user would be immediately expelled, and their side would be deducted 1000 melee points. Of course, you could bring along as many rubber bats as you wanted, as long as you could carry them.

The 7th grade students needed no instruction. They quickly took up their weapons — some took just one, while others took two. This all depended on whether you were more proficient with single-handed wielding or dual-handed wielding.

Ling Lan symbolically took up one of the sticks as well. Frankly, with Ling Lan's capabilities, having a stick or not would not make much of a difference. However, since everyone had taken at least one, she needed to blend in a bit so that she would not stand out too much.

Just when Ling Lan thought that she would only need to sit still patiently and wait for the grand armed melee to start, Qi Long and Wu Jiong unexpectedly collaborated to sell her out. Without letting her know, they directly appointed her as the grand leader of this grand armed melee, and gave her the responsibility of making the overall arrangements and deciding the initial mobilization of their forces. According to Wu Jiong, since the grand armed melee was initiated by Ling Lan, then he should take full responsibility for it.

Ling Lan did not push away this responsibility. From the start, she had planned to use this to settle everything once and for all, getting rid of the troublesome problems from the upper grades with one stroke. She stood up on the open stage of Sunmoon Square, and using the loudspeaker there, she said, "Everyone is saying that we 7th graders have gone mad, actually starting a grand armed melee... but have we truly gone mad?"

"No!" The steel in Ling Lan's voice pulled in the attention of all the 7th grade students.

"After we've entered the upper division, everyone has suffered some hazing, whether big or small, from the seniors of the upper grades. Some even cross the line into outright humiliation. For the sake of graduating peacefully, there's nothing wrong with choosing to tolerate this. It's also a valid and appropriate method, I agree!" These words of Ling Lan's caused the students to break out into a furore — if tolerating is right, then why had he chosen to start this grand armed melee?

"But will tolerating solve the problem? It cannot!" Ling Lan's voice turned cold and

forbidding, even containing a trace of concealed killing intent. "The seniors of the upper grades will not stop just because you tolerate them. In fact, they will just become worse and escalate their bullying time after time... I believe everyone here has felt this. In that case, why should we continue to tolerate? Is it just to hold on through these few years, just to become as hateful as those upper grade seniors, and then bully the new juniors of that time just to comfort ourselves?

"Is that the path we want to walk?" Ling Lan's gaze was extremely cold, chilling all the 7th grade students; they actually did not dare to let their eyes meet hers directly.

"Yes or no?!" Ling Lan roared, the sound ringing out loudly by everyone's ears.

"No!" Qi Long was the first to shout in reply. His cry was soon followed by Wu Jiong's and several others', and then more and more, until everyone's voices were merged into a formidable wave of sound, "NO!"

This was the true voice of the hearts of the 7th grade right then. They had not yet been bullied so much that they had lost their pure souls — without a soul twisted by constant humiliation, they were brimming with guts and fighting spirit. Thus, they refused to let themselves become hateful and grotesque.

"A dark history should be ended, a dark legacy should not exist within the cradle which cultivates qualified soldiers. And we, the 7th grade, shall be the ones to end this dark legacy... we are the champions of what is right!"

"Champions! Champions! Champions!" Everyone's blood was boiling after listening to Ling Lan's speech. That final remaining tendril of fear within their hearts disappeared completely — all that was on their minds now was combat!

Ling Lan waved both hands in a downward sweep to get the students below to quiet down again, and then continued to say unhurriedly, "Of course, I also do not wish for there to be any reckless heroes among us. Intelligence and courage should go hand in hand. Therefore, I recommend that all the merit classes and regular classes move around in teams as a combat unit!

"I do not recommend acting alone. Although the grand armed melee is a messy fight, it is extremely suitable for team members to cooperate with one another. I do not wish for any in our 7th grade to fall. Do not forget — by your side, you have your brothers, your sisters, your friends, your comrades... you are not fighting alone!"

These words received the heartfelt approval of all the 7th graders. Everyone looked at the good friends and teammates around them, and determined that they would fight by their companions' sides till the very end!

"Besides that, do not forget to read closely through all the rules of the grand armed melee. When you all meet a Special Class-A student, remember to press the button to surrender or the button to ask for help... admitting defeat is not shameful. Only by living will there be hope for the future!" Ling Lan emphasized her final words with a push of her spiritual power, hoping that at a critical moment, the students would not be so worked up that they would attempt to perish along with their opponents. However, just this strong push was enough to drain Ling Lan's tremendous spiritual power, and her head started to throb in pain.

After saying her piece, Ling Lan stepped off the stage, giving her place to Wu Jiong and Qi Long. She signalled for Lin Zhong-qing to cover her, and then moved to sit in a corner, closing her eyes to rest and regain her strength.

"Boss, how can you be so reckless?" In the mindspace, Little Four was very dissatisfied with what Ling Lan had done.

"Understood. I won't do it again. Let me rest first; help me monitor the surroundings." Ling Lan did not argue with him, but she also did not regret her decision. Initiating the grand armed melee was to give all the 7th graders a chance to become stronger, not to let them stagnate where they were.

After giving her instructions to Little Four, Ling Lan focused on cultivating her spiritual power. Compared to Luo Lang or Lin Zhong-qing, she trusted Little Four's monitoring even more. Anywhere the academy mainframe could monitor, Little Four would be able to monitor as well, without letting the mainframe find out to boot.

Time passed quickly; very soon, the hour was almost over. Under Wu Jiong, Qi Long, and some others' arrangement, the 7th graders had swiftly departed Sunmoon Square to spread themselves throughout the entire academy, finding spots to conceal themselves.

The grand armed melee was a battle where the two sides hunted each other. Aside from the dormitory area, the entire academy was their hunting grounds. Even if the combined total of the two grades was about 20,000 people, once the students were scattered throughout the Central Scout Academy, they would be like water droplets

falling into an ocean, leaving no lasting ripples behind.

In the end, Wu Jiong's team and the organizing teams also left, leaving Ling Lan's team as the only team in Sunmoon Square. At this moment, the mainframe's voice once again rang out with an announcement that reverberated throughout the whole academy:

"7th grade vs 10th grade, grand armed melee will commence after this countdown. Duration is 24 hours. Winning criteria: The grade with 40% of their population remaining and an accumulated melee score of 60%! Numbers at present — 9212 vs 9374! Accumulated melee score at 0 vs 0. The countdown begins now. 10, 9, 8... 3, 2, 1 — the grand armed melee officially begins!"

As the mainframe officially announced the start of the grand armed melee, a dome of light immediately surrounded the dormitory area. Seeing this, several 10th grade students waiting by the dormitory area were extremely shocked and surprised. They tentatively tried to enter the dormitory area, but were repelled by a powerful force.

Chapter 164

The Strongest Student in the Academy!

"F*ck, we can't go in! The entire dormitory district has actually been fully covered by an energy shield." Apparently, these five or six 10th graders had wanted to watch the fun, planning to run away into the dormitory district if the situation turned bad. Unexpectedly, the mainframe did not leave any room for these students to exploit, directly sealing away the dormitory area behind a light shield. Now, the people inside could not come out, but the people outside similarly could not go in.

"Then what should we do?" asked one of the students, terrified.

"What can we do? Just find a place to hide and wait till everything blows over to come out... Hehe, the 7th grade has 100 people or so less than us; we 10th graders are sure to win this grand armed melee. It's absolutely the right choice for us to join in this grand armed melee." This speaker was rather smug; he seemed to be the head of this group.

"Leader, why do you say so?"

"I've done some digging. Every time, the winning side of the grand armed melee will receive countless resources from the academy. But those who do not participate will not enjoy these benefits... otherwise, why would I bring you all out here and take the risk?"

"What if we happen to encounter any 7th grade Special Class-A students?" This group was entirely made up of regular class people. Even though they were three years older than the 7th graders, they still could not go up against those prodigies in Class-A.

"Are you an idiot? That's why we need to hide well! If we're really that unlucky, we just need to surrender. Once we surrender, the opponent can't do anything to us anymore. If they try anything, we just need to press the help button to get assistance and a teacher will come rescue us. At that time, the one who took action against us would also lose the right to continue on in the grand armed melee..." It looked like this team leader had indeed taken some effort to understand the rules of the grand armed melee just so he could take advantage of the confusion.

"Looks like someone is coming. Hide quickly!" The team leader heard the sound of people approaching, and hurriedly led his team members to hide inside a patch of trees by the side.

Right then, in several locations, the 7th graders and the 10th graders were already clashing...

After Ling Lan heard the mainframe's announcement, she nodded to Qi Long and the others. Then, Qi Long with Han Jijyun, and Luo Lang with Lin Zhong-qing, two in a group, swiftly departed from Sunmoon Square. The initially noisy Sunmoon Square was instantly deathly silent — only Ling Lan was left standing alone on the stage, looking off into the distance.

"Little Four, where is the top rank of the 10th grade Class-A?" Ling Lan decided to first test the waters, wanting to see how strong the best of the 10th grade was.

Little Four immediately displayed the location of the 10th grade top rank with a red dot on a 2D map of the Central Scout Academy. With a flying leap, Ling Lan left Sunmoon Square without a sound.

"Leader, are we not going to hide?" Somewhere in the academy, six people were standing in a blatantly noticeable location. Their bright red clothes clearly displayed their class. One of the members was glancing around nervously as he questioned a grim-faced youth.

"It's just that bunch of 7th graders. Are they worth hiding for?" The grim-faced youth did not reply, instead, another member standing beside him spoke up with a dismissive quirk of his brow, seemingly not at all worried about this so-called grand armed melee.

"Rumour has it that their top rank Qi Long is very formidable..." cautioned that nervous-looking team member.

For some reason, he just could not shake the feeling that danger was coming. Although he had no idea what this feeling was, many times, this kind of feeling had let him overcome one threat after another. And this time, this sense of danger was even stronger than anything he had ever felt before — he just had no way of explaining it, because no one on his team would believe him even if he spoke up.

"Last year, he challenged the 8th grade, which is to say the current 9th grade top rank, Lu Jing, and failed. And Lu Jing can't last more than 30 moves against our team leader. These 7th graders are definitely no match for our team leader," argued yet another team member.

"Yeah, the team leader is the only combat genius that has entered the Qi-Jin stage in the scout academy right now, you know! He's the strongest student in the academy!" said another team member, face filled with idolisation, "If the team leader had publicized this information, those 7th grade brats would never have dared to suggest something like this grand armed melee."

At this moment, the grim-faced youth spoke, "Alright, if you all have the strength to bicker you might as well go and clean up some of those 7th graders. I never again want to see something like that incident three years ago..."

A wave of rage emerged on the youth's face. He was the pride of his grade, but three years ago, his team had lost to a barrier-breaking team from some third-rate planet's scout academy. And then, this year, the 10th graders led by him had actually been challenged to a grand armed melee by the juniors of the 7th grade... this was clearly a smack to his face! Did they really think this grade of his was so easy to bully?

"Someone's coming!" One of the team members suddenly voiced a warning.

Following that, a team of 7th grade students dressed in blue uniforms could be seen peeking out from behind the trees...

"Crap, why are we so unlucky? Meeting the 10th grade top rank Zhang Jing-an's team right off the bat." When the leader of this team saw the face of the rumoured strongest scout at present, his mind became a jumbled mess. He immediately signalled for his team members to quickly retreat and escape.

"Eh, where did they go?" One of the running team members looked back to check on the 10th grade team, but found that the 6 people standing there previously had all disappeared.

"Not good, run faster!" The team leader had barely finished speaking when the ground beneath his feet shook violently. His entire body was thrown backwards into the air, before he fell to crash forcefully onto the ground. There was a tightness in his chest, making him feel nauseous.

The team leader hurriedly leapt up to check on his teammates and found the situation unpromising. The weakest team member was already coughing up blood, obviously having sustained heavy internal damage.

At this moment, 6 figures appeared in front of them. As expected, it was Zhang Jing-an's group of six.

One of them abruptly charged over, the stick in his hand swinging down towards the 7th grade regular class team leader.

The team leader reacted quickly — evading with a twist of his body, his own rubber bat swinging out with the movement. But just as his rubber bat was about to strike the opponent, the other suddenly vanished, and then he felt his abdomen being struck harshly. Once again, he was sent flying backwards through the air, and this time, in the air, a mouthful of blood spewed out!

With just one hit, he had been injured seriously!

They were definitely no match for these people! This notion rose swiftly in the team leader's mind. The pain in his body should have dulled his reflexes, but for some reason, his fingers moved even quicker than his mind, pressing down on the button to surrender immediately. At the same time, the button seeking rescue lighted up.

He had just crashed onto the ground again when that 10th grade team member rushed in once more to attack with his stick. Suddenly, the 7th grade team leader's communicator emitted a white light, which instantly repelled the stick! At the same time, the two combatants received a notification from the mainframe: "Attacking a target which has already surrendered — 100 melee points deduction!"

"F*ck, what is this?! Actually losing points!" yelled the 10th grade team member angrily when he read the notification.

Zhang Jing-an stared coldly at the regular class team leader on the ground and said, "His reaction time was pretty quick, actually managing to press the surrender button in that split second in the air. Liulian, you were too careless."

"Looks like this fellow's reflexes are really good!" Another member stared curiously at the 7th grade regular class team leader, seemingly very interested in studying him.

"We've surrendered!" The 7th grade team leader's heart was filled with fright. He

quickly yelled out to remind the opponents that they could not attack an opponent who had surrendered. The other team members also reacted quickly. During the span of their conversation, they had also pressed the surrender button.

"Tch, so boring!" They had initially hoped the opponent would resist a little so they could toy with them, but unexpectedly, this team actually did not have a single shred of courage, actually choosing to surrender just after being injured with one hit.

These 10th graders could not have imagined that the 7th graders were so decisive and quick to choose to surrender because Ling Lan had embedded a subliminal trigger within them with her spiritual power during her speech. When they encountered an opponent who was distinctly stronger than they were, they would not struggle needlessly but choose to surrender immediately to save their lives.

In fact, the grand armed melee had not been as bloody and cruel as it was made out to be at its inception. Everyone who participated in a grand armed melee in the beginning had known who their opponents were — the regular classes would seek out the regular classes, the merit classes would seek out the merit classes, the special classes would seek out the special classes — so everyone would be fighting against someone of almost equivalent strength. In that way, both sides would be able to gain battle experience while raising their individual capabilities at the same time.

However, as time went on, the grand armed melee began to change in nature. In order to obtain victory, the stronger students would first go after the students from the regular classes. Some who were particularly twisted would not even give those regular class students a chance to surrender, killing them straightaway. The side who was harmed then decided to repay blood with blood and also began sending out their strongest students to go kill the other side's regular students. In the end, the situation spiralled out of control, amassing large number of casualties and injuries on each side. Thus, the academy had no choice but to make it much harder for the students to initiate a grand armed melee.

Ling Lan naturally knew the tragic history of the grand armed melee. To cut off this potential development, Ling Lan purposefully exerted spiritual pressure to embed a subliminal command, almost causing her spiritual power to collapse on itself. When meeting an opponent of overwhelming strength or obtaining a serious injury, surrender. Even if they were unconscious, their bodies would move because of this subliminal command and press the surrender button.

"Let's leave. After they surrender, a teacher will soon be here to take them away," said another team member. Continuing to linger here would just be a waste of time.

"Fine. I think I sense another team of mice approaching. Who knows what level they are this time... I hope we can have some fun." One of the team members could sense the approach of another team, and his gaze shone with a faint red light.

"Go!" Zhang Jing-an said only that before disappearing. The others soon followed him.

Seeing no one else around them, the 7th grade regular class team instantly relaxed.

"So this is the top ranking team of the 10th grade Class-A. Our strength is really too far apart from theirs; we couldn't even take one attack..." The team leader was extremely depressed, "Who knows if Qi Long can stand up against them..."

"Qi Long already lost to Lu Jing of the 9th grade, and Lu Jing can't defeat Zhang Jing-an. I don't anticipate the outcome of this grand armed melee!" One of the team members was pessimistic.

"What are you all saying? Have you all forgotten that Qi Long still has a boss on top of him? The real king of our 7th grade is Ling Lan!" Another team member was indignant, "One move? Leader, don't tell me you can withstand one move from Boss Ling Lan?"

Despite being needled by his team members, the team leader was not at all angry. Instead, his spirits rallied. "Oh yeah! how could I forget that we still have Boss Ling Lan? Anyone against him has been finished off in one blow — he's definitely no weaker than Zhang Jing-an."

"However, we've really lost face this time, being kicked out of the fight so soon after it started. We need to train well once we get back..." sighed the team leader.

His words caused all the team members to fall into a contemplative silence. That's right, they were probably the first batch to leave the field! That was truly disgraceful! A strong desire to become stronger rose within their hearts. If there were to be another grand armed melee in the future, they definitely did not want to be the first batch of students to leave again!

Chapter 165

Team Zhang Jing-an!

On a small path within a dense patch of forest, a team of white-clad students were running for their lives. The words embroidered on their chests proved that this team was a 7th grade one.

"They're coming after us..." One of the team members seemed to sense something. His expression fell, and he quickly told his teammates the bad news.

The team leader knew that continuing to run was useless. Originally, he was hoping that the other party was just passing by and would overlook their team, but now, from the looks of it, the opponent had clearly set their sights on them. He gritted his teeth and commanded, "You all run ahead!"

"Leader!" all the team members exclaimed. It was clear that the team leader was preparing to stay behind alone to hold off their pursuers.

"Don't worry, if I really cannot hold them off, I will surrender! But our whole team cannot fall here." The team leader's thoughts were clear. They were certainly no match for the team pursuing them, so even if the entire team stayed back to fight, the final outcome would still be their loss. And the final judgement on who wins and who loses a grand armed melee is greatly dependent on the final number of people remaining. From the start, the number of 7th graders who participated in this grand armed melee was already less than the other side, so they needed to save as many people as they could.

"Leader, you lead them away!" The team member right at the end suddenly stopped running, standing still right where he was. If they really had to leave someone behind to hold off the enemy, they might as well let him, the weakest member, do it. Even if he left the grand armed melee, it would not make a significant difference to the overall strength of his team.

"Xiaoming..." The team members were clearly reluctant — he was a companion who had grown along with them all this time after all.

"Go! Do you all want to fold here?!" shouted the student called Xiaoming angrily.

The team leader saw that Xiaoming had been left far behind during this time; it was now too late even if they wanted to leave another person instead. At this moment, he could not afford any moment of hesitation. Thus, he merely slowed for a brief moment to say, "Let's go!" before resolutely running ahead.

The team members could only shove their reluctance away and gritted their teeth to chase after the team leader. Running with all their might, they soon disappeared from Xiaoming's sight.

A red-clad youth rushing swiftly after the team saw the white-clad Xiaoming standing in the middle of the road, and so halted.

His sudden stop made the other red-clad youths behind him stop as well. The number 10 was embroidered neatly on their red uniforms, showing them to be 10th grade students.

"Hoho, looks like they plan to sacrifice one to save the other team members. Leader, what should we do?" The youth who had stopped first asked his team leader standing behind him.

"Shi Qi, have you noted the details of those few people running away?" The team leader turned to ask the red-clad youth beside him tonelessly.

"No problem, Leader. As long as they stay within 2 kilometres of us, they won't get away," said Shi Qi proudly. His awakened talent was Lock-On — as long as he locked onto an opponent's details within his mind, he would be able to seek out the opponent within a 2 kilometre radius.

"How long before they escape from your search radius?" the team leader continued to ask.

"4 minutes!" replied Shi Qi confidently.

"Yuan Chen, I'll let you play for a bit with the person below!" said the team leader to the youth who had first stopped, "You only have 3 minutes and 30 seconds!"

Yuan Chen rubbed his palms together excitedly. "That's enough!" That said, he glided down from the tree to land squarely in front of the 7th grade white-clad youth

Xiaoming standing in the middle of the road.

It was precisely Zhang Jing-an's team which had chased up to this 7th grade Class-B team.

When the white-clad Xiaoming saw just one red-clad youth appear before him, he gripped the bat in his hand nervously. His gaze flitted to the trees on both sides, trying to sense where the other members of the other's team were.

"Relax, I'm the only one fighting you!" Even as Yuan Chen's words reassured him, Xiaoming couldn't help but worry for his own teammates.

"How pitiful, actually being sold out by your teammates, being left behind to be a sacrificial offering!" Though Yuan Chen's lips kept yapping on about how pitiful Xiaoming was, the bat in his hands showed no mercy. He rushed forwards fiercely to attack the other with a savage blow.

The white-clad Xiaoming was very agile. Seeing the other attacking, he instantly leapt backwards, cleanly avoiding the opponent's strike.

"Not bad... looks like you still want to struggle a bit before dying." Yuan Chen licked his lips in excitement. He raised his bat and continued to attack. This time, his attack speed increased considerably; the bat rained down on Xiaoming like the battering of the rains and winds in a thunderstorm. It looked like his first strike had just been a casual attack, not reflective of his real strength. Moreover, he did not stop needling his opponent verbally, "What a shame, you are just too weak. You can't even take a few of my attacks. You're destined to just suffer by my hands."

The white-clad Xiaoming ignored Yuan Chen's mockery. He merely gritted his teeth and did his best to resist, finally managing to defend against all of the opponent's attacks this round. But even so, Xiaoming could already feel his right hand, which was gripping the stick, going numb and senseless from the repeated battery of the other's power. He knew that if the other continued to attack this way, he would eventually be overcome...

A loud thump! This was the sound of a bat striking flesh!

"Ah!" cried out Xiaoming in pain. His entire person was thrown backwards into the air by the force of this attack. His numbed right hand had finally been unable to react in time, failing to block a savage blow by the opponent.

Seeing this, Yuan Chen laughed gleefully; this was fully within his estimations. And so, showing no mercy, he once more sped up and got in close to the other, prepared to pummel the other soundly.

Right then, Shi Qi, who had been quietly watching the fight, suddenly let out a shocked cry.

Zhang Jing-an's brow twitched. "What happened? Shi Qi?"

"Nothing, Leader! It's just that those few little mice who had been running away are actually coming back!" Shi Qi announced his discovery to the others.

"Could it be that they are trying to catch us off guard? Or trying to launch a sneak attack? Aren't they looking down on us too much?" Another team member couldn't help but snicker.

"This is even better, saving us the effort of chasing them down." Zhang Jing-an felt that this was a good thing, so he shouted down to Yuan Chen below, "Yuan Chen, take your time and play. Those little mice are coming back, so you have plenty of time."

Zhang Jing-an's words caused the white-clad Xiaoming to panic. Mentally, he was angry and anxious — angry that his teammates had chosen to come back, and anxious that they would end up being completely wiped out here because of this.

Still, no matter how angry and anxious Xiaoming was, he could not suppress the surge of warmth that rose up within his heart. He knew that his teammates' choice was largely because they did not want to abandon him.

Hearing Zhang Jing-an's words, Yuan Chen's initially rapid attack pace slowed. As he swung the bat in his hands, he resumed mocking the white-clad Xiaoming, "Ho, looks like, those few teammates of yours think pretty highly of you, actually choosing to turn back to rescue you... however, this decision is really too stupid. Your team really sucks. Who's your team leader? Wishy-washy and indecisive, and also having no self-awareness... under his lead, you all will definitely never become a strong team and become strong individually. Like now, all you all can be is our stepping stones!"

"Whether our team sucks or not, I do not know. What I do know is that my team is a little better than your team — at least we are more humane than you all are," responded Xiaoming coolly. It's fine if they wanted to mock him, but he would not allow them to scorn his team leader and his companions.

"F*ck you!" Xiaoming's words thoroughly enraged Yuan Chen. Yuan Chen's attack speed rose once again, his rubber bat striking the other's body ceaselessly without mercy, once again throwing the other backwards into the air. These consecutive heavy blows dealt extremely heavy internal damage to Xiaoming, who could not help but throw up blood.

Not too far away, on the branch of a large tree, Ling Lan was closely watching the situation. An ice bead silently appeared in her palm. The other benefits of Ice Affinity were not obvious, but when she was trying to launch a stealth attack, she did not have to waste time and effort to find a hidden weapon — she just needed to focus and she would have a weapon.

Ling Lan aimed at a particular direction where a figure was laying... a nimble flick of her finger; and the ice bead flew...

"Ouch!" On one tree, a white-clad youth who had been lying down among the branches secretly watching the show suddenly felt a force push him lightly from behind. This push was not strong enough to hurt him, but it made him lose his balance to fall down from the branches.

He turned back to look for the source of the push, but saw no one. There seemed to be a glimmer in the air, but when he narrowed his gaze to look closer, it had disappeared, as if it had just been in his imagination.

"Ah ah ah... help!" The white-clad youth did not find the culprit and so could only turn back around and struggle desperately in the air. But in the end, he still ended up crashing spread-eagled onto the ground.

This unexpected scene gave Zhang Jing-an and company a fright. About to launch another attack, Yuan Chen stopped, turning his head to look at this unexpected guest who had disturbed his fight.

In contrast to the other's surprise, Zhang Jing-an's face showed a trace of seriousness. Being able to sneak up on them without being noticed, this white-clad youth was obviously not a simple character. He may very well have some unique hidden ability. Zhang Jing-an immediately discarded the possibility that the other was stronger than him; he did not think anyone from Class-B could be that strong.

The white-clad youth pushed himself up from the ground with difficulty, moaning all

the way. His exaggerated manner made everyone stare at him curiously.

Meanwhile, when Xiaoming saw the face of the white-clad youth, he couldn't help but exclaim, "Xie Yi, why are you here?"

"So it's a 7th grade junior! Come to save your fellow classmate? What admirable fellowship." When Yuan Chen saw the number embroidered on the other's chest, he tapped his bat lightly against his left arm, and spoke up with a half-smile.

Xie Yi patted the dust off his clothes and said with an expression of consternation, "You think too highly of me. Facing a team of the top 10th graders, if I have this notion, then I'm definitely a moron. Honestly, I just didn't hold onto that tree securely enough and fell down by accident. If possible, can you all just pretend you didn't see me..."

"Do you think, that is possible?" asked Yuan Chen darkly.

Xie Yi's face fell instantly, and he pouted and started muttering to himself, "I just knew it. Not hugging onto the tree properly would end up like this... Ahem, I'm really too pitiful. Just trying to get a good show and being pulled in like this... How about you seniors show some mercy and we just exchange a move for show and call it a day?"

Speaking up at the end, Xie Yi's eyes were sparkling brightly, his expression clearly broadcasting the fact that he just wanted to have a good discussion with the 10th grade seniors. Everyone sweatdropped. Could it be that this fellow was truly a moron with a lacking brain?

Chapter 166

Who's the Opponent?

"That's fine. You just need to stand there and not move and let me hit you a few times and everything will be over!" Yuan Chen had barely finished speaking when he charged over, ready to teach this flippant punk a good lesson.

"That won't do. If I get hit, it'll hurt..." squealed Xie Yi in fright, turning to run. Just when Yuan Chen was about to hit him, Xie Yi suddenly looked back and leapt into the air. His initially empty right hand now somehow had a rubber bat in it, and he launched a powerful downward chop towards Yuan Chen's head.

Xie Yi's counterattack came too quickly and too suddenly — this unexpected move gave Yuan Chen a great scare. He did not dare to continue attacking Xie Yi, jerking to a quick stop to raise his own bat above his head, blocking Xie Yi's attack head-on. Luckily he had reacted swiftly, otherwise Xie Yi would have succeeded in his sneak attack.

However, even so, Yuan Chen had still taken a hit. Xie Yi had been acting with a plan, while Yuan Chen had only been reacting reflexively — this attack caused him to stumble 3 to 4 steps backwards, a dull pain roiling in his chest. He couldn't help but open his mouth and blood spewed out immediately...

"Despicable!" Yuan Chen pressed a hand to his chest and choked out in rage.

"This attacking method... it's too wretched and despicable!" Rage coloured Zhang Jing-an's face; their team had never suffered such a disgrace before.

Xie Yi acted as if he did not understand what was going on. A puzzled expression on his face, he said, "Aiyaiyai, senior, why are you throwing up blood suddenly? Are you trying to tell us that as long as we work hard, we will benefit?" Xie Yi's face lit up instantly, and he said emotionally, "Boo hoo hoo, Senior, you are really such a great guy! Still not forgetting to teach us even during this critical time, even willing to pay the price of getting injured..."

"Shut up! I'm definitely going to kill you!" Yuan Chen's eyes were completely bloodshot. He felt that he had been played by this ant before him — he felt humiliated,

feeling that his dignity had been ruthlessly stomped beneath the other's feet. He wanted revenge. He needed the blood of the opponent to wash away his humiliation. For the first time, an intense desire to kill swelled within his heart...

Not too far away, Ling Lan's brows furrowed. She could clearly sense the 10th grader's desire to kill. Unable to accept the strength of someone he viewed as weaker than him, and thus choosing to destroy the other? Could this also be considered an ugly aspect of humanity?

Ling Lan looked at the still cheerful Xie Yi who seemed oblivious to Yuan Chen's intent to kill, and a smile bloomed on her lips. "I thought that I had already concealed my capabilities well enough, but unexpectedly, someone is even better at hiding than I am¹... as expected, this world isn't that simple..."

"Yuan Chen, don't break the rules..." Zhang Jing-an too had sensed Yuan Chen desire to kill, and so spoke up to warn him.

"Leader, don't worry, I will settle this matter perfectly." As long as he did not give the other a chance to surrender or ask for help, even if he killed the other 'by accident', the academy would have no way to punish him. "Leader, you all can leave temporarily." He did not want people nattering on beside him when he committed murder, even if it were his team leader.

Zhang Jing-an cast a searching look at Yuan Chen and then said, "Alright..." That said, with a quick dash, he left the scene. Shi Qi and the others merely glanced at Yuan Chen, then left after Zhang Jing-an without saying anything.

After Zhang Jing-an and the others had left, Xie Yi's smiling face abruptly became solemn. He said to Xiaoming behind him, "You should leave quickly..."

"No way. I can't leave you alone with him. Let's fight together." Xiaoming was determined. He felt that no matter what, two people together would stand a better chance of winning than one person.

"Puh-leeze. You're already seriously injured. How do you plan to fight? Furthermore, if you aren't here, it'll be easier for me to escape! Running away is my specialty, don't hold me back!" Xie Yi couldn't help but roll his eyes. Sometimes, being too steadfast was also a troublesome thing.

"Really?" Xiaoming wasn't sure whether he should take Xie Yi at his word.

"Of course it's true! Quickly, go, go!" Xie Yi's expression was annoyed. He waved his hand impatiently at Xiaoming, as if shooing away a fly.

Xiaoming looked at Xie Yi worriedly, but seeing that Xie Yi seemed to be serious about this, he clenched his teeth and left the scene.

Knowing that Xiaoming had left the scene, Xie Yi's initially tense expression instantly relaxed. "Aiks, the troublesome people have all left. Now, let us play..." With no one watching, Xie Yi was planning to bring out his secret techniques. Otherwise, what was the point in keeping them hidden for so many years...? Besides, he also did not want to let off someone who wanted to kill him — he was not a saint.

Yuan Chen said sinisterly, "Yes, it is indeed time for us to play..." That said, he pounced!

Somewhere else, Zhang Jing-an had led his 5 team members to run about five to six hundred metres away. Then, Shi Qi reminded, "Those people are just ahead. We'll see them soon." He was talking about that team of 7th grade Class-B students they had been chasing from the start.

"Zhu Qi, Qing Ming, I'll leave those people for you guys to handle!" For opponents like this, Zhang Jing-an had no need to act himself.

"Shi Qi, you keep watch over the situation!" Zhang Jing-an sent Shi Qi over as well not because he was worried that Zhu Qi and Qing Ming would fail, but rather because he was afraid one or two people would manage to separate and run off from the team again. Zhang Jing-an liked to wrap things up in one go, and did not like there to be any loose ends.

"Yes, Leader!" The three of them acknowledged their orders and quickly sprinted off.

"Leader, what about me?" The remaining team member was rather depressed. Everyone had their own tasks; only he had nothing to do.

"Luo Qiong, haven't you noticed something off? I keep having the feeling that someone is watching us, but I can't find the other," admitted Zhang Jing-an to this remaining team member.

"Leader, could it be some teachers watching us?" This was the first thing Luo Qiong

could think of. Some teachers were truly very formidable — the more the students learned, the more they found those teachers frightening.

"This is also possible, which is why I have brought you all away from Yuan Chen. If the teacher's attention stayed there, then we wouldn't sense anything here... but this feeling kept following me. Even after I sent Zhu Qi and Qing Ming off, this feeling still stayed here..." As Zhang Jing-an continued to elaborate, he suddenly exclaimed in surprise, "The feeling is gone..."

Then, his expression changed drastically. "Not good. Something has happened to Shi Qi!" Shi Qi's presence was no longer concealed; this meant that he had most likely lost consciousness.

"Has he been attacked? Is it our opponents?" cried Luo Qiong, shocked.

"Of course it's the opponent. Those teachers would never attack Shi Qi." Zhang Jing-an's expression was dark. He had actually been unknowingly followed by an opponent, and by spreading out his forces, he had unintentionally fallen for the opponent's plot.

Ling Lan had quietly snuck up to Shi Qi who was hiding on a tree branch, and before the other could notice her and react, she had struck him unconscious with one blow. She then carefully laid the other down on the branch, quietly pressing the other's surrender button to ask for assistance.

Right below, Zhu Qi and Qing Ming were oblivious. At that moment, they were gleefully watching the five figures who had appeared in front of them. It was the 7th grade Class-B team who had returned to try and rescue their teammate with a sneak attack.

Between Ling Lan's fingers, two extremely small and thin ice needles appeared out of thin air. With a flick of her wrist, the ice needles flew silently through the air to pierce into the area behind Zhu Qi's and Qing Ming's neck. The two of them shivered, feeling a chill spread out from their neck. However, this feeling merely flashed by, quickly disappearing without a trace, causing them to think that they had imagined it.

The thin ice needles would not actually hurt them, and also would not give them any lingering after-effects. But for one hour, their true strength would be restricted by 30% to 40% by the cold air of the needles. This was a chance Ling Lan was giving to the 7th grade team. Whether or not they could take advantage of it would depend fully on the efforts of the 7th grade team members.

After doing all this, Ling Lan left the scene to return to the place where Zhang Jing-an was waiting.

"You've come!" Zhang Jing-an could feel himself being watched once again. So, he spoke up, hoping to trick the other into revealing themselves.

Meanwhile, as Zhang Jing-an spoke, Luo Qiong was looking around nervously. Dammit, he had not sensed anyone approaching! Could it be that the opponent was like Xie Yi and had a special concealment talent? He did not believe that the 7th grade students could be that much stronger than him.

"As expected of the first rank of the 10th grade!" A cold voice rang out, as if right by their ears, but also as if coming from a far distance. Zhang Jing-an tried to pinpoint the opponent's position based on this voice but could not; instead, this voice seemed to muffle all other sounds around him.

"Ugh..." Luo Qiong made a strangled sound, as if his voice had been stoppered at his throat. Without thinking about it, Zhang Jing-an leapt in Luo Qiong's direction, but there was already no one there.

Zhang Jing-an stood there, cold sweat dripping from his forehead. The opponent had already made his move, and he had lost a team member in an instant, but he had not seen a hair of the opponent. Thus, he had no idea at all who the opponent was — when had such an abnormal prodigy appeared in the 7th grade? Or could it be said that some perverse and deviant teacher was playing a joke on him?

At this point, Ling Lan had already appeared where she had placed Shi Qi earlier. She put Luo Qiong there as well and pressed his surrender button too before disappearing again.

Ling Lan had not disappeared for long before two figures abruptly appeared on that large tree branch. Seeing the two red-clad youths on the branch, they exclaimed, "They're from the 10th grade Class-A..."

One of them bent down to check the necks of the two laid down on the branch, "They're unconscious!"

"How are their injuries?" asked the other with a worried tone.

"The opponent's method is very polished. These two were knocked unconscious in

one hit without any warning. They are not injured at all." The person who was checking on them continued to diagnose the reason for their condition.

"So what you're saying is, the opponent knocked them unconscious and then pressed their surrender button to get us to take them away?" said the other, pleasantly surprised.

"Looks like it..." The person checking on the students was just as pleased. Discovering a strong student indeed made them very happy, but they were even happier that this student's morality was impeccable as well. Every teacher hoped that their academy would produce such a student who was exemplary in body, mind, and soul.

"The 7th grade students aren't as weak as we had expected..." The teachers had originally thought that the 7th grade would certainly lose this grand armed melee without a doubt. Now, it looked like it was too early to come to a conclusion just yet.

Chapter 167

Drawing a Snake Out of Its Lair?

"No matter what the situation is as they fight, we can only observe from the sidelines and try our best to avoid cases of death and bloodshed..." said the teacher solemnly, with regret. Back when they had been scouts themselves, they had never gone through such a stirring incident like this grand armed melee.

Each holding onto a student, the two teachers swiftly left the scene. Like they said, no matter how much their hands itched to do something, they could only do their duty as a transporter — moving students who had failed off the field, watching dumbly as the students fought each other until the grand armed melee ended.

Zhang Jing-an felt that immense pressure disappear, and knew that the opponent must have distanced themselves once more after succeeding in their attack. His eyes narrowed as he quickly forced himself to calm down. His initiate instructor had once told him that, on the battlefield, no matter what the situation was, one had to remain calm. The moment one loses their calm, one would be at death's door.

His entire being quietened, and then a surge of energy burst out from within him, spreading out. The melodies on the wind of this energy surge flowed towards Zhang Jing-an like musical notes. Abruptly, Zhang Jing-an turned to stare in a particular direction and said coldly, "Are you still not going to come out?"

Since she had been discovered, Ling Lan did not waste time hiding any further. She walked out from behind a large tree, and coming to stand about 20 metres away from Zhang Jing-an, the two of them stared evenly at each other.

The other was wearing the same red uniform as he was, and the number 7 glinting on the other's chest proved that he was one of the rival 7th graders in this grand armed melee. However, that elegant and cold face was not the 7th grade top rank, Qi Long, whom they were familiar with. A thought flashed through Zhang Jing-an's mind, and he said, "Qi Long's boss —— Ling Lan!"

Ling Lan quirked a brow, as if surprised that Zhang Jing-an knew her name.

"The uncrowned king of the 7th grade is no secret. If one wants to know, then one will know," said Zhang Jing-an tonelessly. That said, if it were not for the grand armed melee this time, he might not have known that such an exceptional expert was hiding in the 7th grade. Originally, he had thought that no matter how strong the other was, he would at most be at the level of the 9th grade Lu Jing. But now, from the look of things, he had miscalculated.

"Looks like you were already aiming for me from the start! This situation right now should be your doing. We can finally face off one on one... however, you really think you are a match for me?" Zhang Jing-an remarked with a half-smile. In his eyes, Ling Lan's planning was undoubtedly a little too self-conceited.

Ling Lan did not answer Zhang Jing-an, but only continued to stare at him emotionlessly, causing Zhang Jing-an to be unable to figure out what Ling Lan was thinking.

In truth, Ling Lan was actually conversing with Little Four in the mindscape. "*Little Four, where are those people now?*"

Apparently, just now, Little Four suddenly alerted Ling Lan to the fact that the people he was monitoring had finally started to move.

"About 3 kilometres from here," responded Little Four, confirming the others' position. Little Four was currently in sharing mode with the academy mainframe — everything within the academy was at his fingertips. Also, according to Ling Lan's wishes, he did not apply any concealment methods onto Ling Lan. Therefore, as long as someone wanted to, they could easily find out where Ling Lan was.

"Little Four, looks like the things you discovered were accurate." A murderous glint flashed through Ling Lan's eyes. Another big reason she had initiated this grand armed melee was to lure the snake out of its lair — and now, from the looks of it, the opponent had not been able to hold back, as expected.

However, she first needed to handle this fellow in front of her as fast as possible... Ling Lan glanced at Zhang Jing-an standing before her. Even though this person was very cocky and arrogant, and his personality was nothing great, Ling Lan still did not want to involve him in the cat-and-mouse blood sport of her and her enemy, and cause his death by unlucky chance. Thus, she decided on a speedy fight to end things quickly, and eliminate him from the grand armed melee as soon as possible.

Right then, Zhang Jing-an was thrilled — the faint sense of Ling Lan's natural force of presence let him know that the other was an expert — he was glad to find a worthy opponent. Ever since the seniors had graduated from the academy, he had had the feeling of being a large mountain surrounded by molehills. Especially when he became ever more proficient at using the mutation of his spiritual self, he had thought himself unrivalled among the academy students! While this made him proud of himself, it also made him feel somewhat dejected — it was not a pleasant feeling to be alone at the top of the world without a match who could rival him.

Perhaps this youth before him now could give him a good fight and loosen his joints! Although Zhang Jing-an felt that Ling Lan could bring some colour into his life, he never even considered the possibility that Ling Lan could defeat him.

Zhang Jing-an wanted to fight, so he charged in directly. He did not use a rubber bat or any so-called fancy moves — he attacked with a simple punch. Perhaps Zhang Jing-an felt that victory was within his grasp, and so thought that there was no need for any complicated moves, that his strength alone was enough to steamroll the opponent.

It looked as if Zhang Jing-an only took a single unassuming step, but this simple one step actually carried him across the entire 20 metres of distance between the two combatants — in an instant, he was already right in front of Ling Lan.

In fact, this was just a trick of the eye — Ling Lan could clearly see Zhang Jing-an take ten steps within this short period of time to come right up to her. Meanwhile, Zhang Jing-an's right fist was already flying towards her face.

Whether in terms of his crossing over or this final punch, his speed had reached an extreme — Zhang Jing-an even had the misperception that in the very next second, his fist would strike the opponent and send the other flying... the smile on his lips had just begun to blossom when time froze.

Because, he felt his fist being detained by a gentle force, preventing him from moving any further.

It turned out that right at the moment Ling Lan was about to be struck, she too made a fist and met Zhang Jing-an's punch with a punch of her own. Although the two fists seemed to collide violently, no sound was produced. It was as if there had been no power behind the two punches at all, making the collision seem like a friendly fist bump.

Zhang Jing-an knew his own strength — he had definitely used about 80% of his strength in that punch of his. A situation like this would only occur because the opponent had met his punch with a corresponding amount of power, hence neutralizing the power of his punch with amazing gentleness.

This punch of Zhang Jing-an's did not create his desired effect, instead pushing him into a deadlock. Now, his choices were to either pull back his strength and try again, or push more force into his punch to continue pressing forwards. As long as his strength could overpower the opponent's, the deadlock would be broken, and the combined forces of both of them might even crash down completely on his opponent.

Zhang Jing-an naturally was unwilling to just pull back; from the start, he had considered himself the stronger party. So, with a soft shout, his entire face instantly flushed red. He abruptly sucked in his belly, and then with several consecutive shakes of his wrist, four silent and invisible energy waves were sent flying towards Ling Lan.

This was an ace in the hole given to him by his initiate instructor — he could unleash four hidden energy waves instantly, and each wave would stack onto the force of the wave before it so that by the time the final wave struck, it would carry the terrifying power of eight times the force of his personal strength. Of course, his initiate instructor warned him repeatedly to not use this move unless absolutely necessary. However, Zhang Jing-an felt that this was the perfect time to use it — because this was a battle of pride between the strongest of the 10th grade and the 7th grade!

Just by looking at her opponent's hand movements, Ling Lan could tell that the opponent had likely used a power-stacking technique. She decisively used One-Inch Punch — the two hidden forces clashed repeatedly, until finally, neither force could suppress the other, and so both of them blew up simultaneously.

Ling Lan and Zhang Jing-an were blasted backwards into the air by this massive backlash of energy. Even the stout tree they were standing by was destroyed instantly by the blast, its broken branches falling from the sky to crash into the ground.

With a reverse plank in mid-air, Ling Lan stabilised her body, landing firmly on the tree fork of another large tree not too far away. On the other hand, Zhang Jing-an did not have as good a time of it — only after flying out for about 5 to 6 metres did he manage to grab hold of a random tree branch with his left hand and, with that as leverage, pull himself back onto a tree to find stable footing again. Still, his right arm hung low, swaying freely with his body movements.

Ling Lan pressed her own right arm with her left hand, and said coldly, "As expected of the number one of the 10th grade, breaking my right arm with one move."

At the same time, Zhang Jing-an was also gripping his own right arm, expression unsightly as he said, "You're not weak either!" Similarly, his arm had also been broken by the other. That last move could be considered a loss on both sides. At this time, Zhang Jing-an no longer had any of the sense of superiority he had at the start; he now knew very well that Ling Lan was an expert at the same level as him.

"Still, even so, we must determine who is stronger!" Ling Lan seemed set on having a clear winner and loser — the moment she finished talking, she stomped forcefully, then borrowing the rebound from the tree branch, she flew forwards like a cannonball at Zhang Jing-an, completely ignoring the injury of her right arm.

Zhang Jing-an's expression was solemn. He knew that this time, it was time to determine a final outcome. For combatants like them at the Qi-Jin level, victory and defeat would be determined in a split second — it just came down to whose Qi-Jin was better.

This time, Ling Lan chose to attack with her left hand. Of course, she could *only* use her left hand now, but, she seemed to not be very confident in her left hand, choosing to attack with a rubber bat.

Zhang Jing-an too chose to attack with a rubber bat. Gripping it tightly with his left hand, he moved to meet her attack. The two were just about to clash, when Ling Lan's face suddenly revealed an expression of great shock and she shouted, "Dodge quickly!"

Zhang Jing-an was unmoved by this, his left hand and the rubber bat in it still moving forwards with the strength of his entire body.

Hmph! Thinking to trick me like this? No way! This notion had barely brushed through Zhang Jing-an's mind when he felt the back of his head being struck a heavy blow...

He instantly felt as if his body were drained of all energy. As he fell down, with his last remaining bit of consciousness, he saw Ling Lan across from him choosing to turn tail and run, as if seeing some frightful being...

Hells, so he wasn't trying to trick me... At this moment, Zhang Jing-an's heart was filled with regret. If only he had listened to the other's warning. Would he then have been safe from this sneak attack?

Zhang Jing-an tumbled down from the tree he was standing on, but before he could crash into the ground, a figure swept by to catch him and set him down gently on the ground. At the same time, the figure pressed Zhang Jing-an's surrender button, and then disappeared instantly without a trace.

Somewhere 1000 metres away, a team of five dressed in instructor garbs were pausing for a moment. One of them, a 27 or 28 year old young teacher was activating his spiritual power to delve into the nearest monitoring signal, trying to locate the position of their target with all his might.

"The other's position right now has changed. From the initial southeast direction, he has moved towards the north," the teacher opened his eyes and said to a 35 or 36 year old male teacher beside him.

Chapter 168

Is This Mission Really Right?

"How far from us?" This teacher should be the leader of this team. At hearing his team member's report, he could not help but frown.

"Not even 1000 metres away," replied the scanning teacher.

"Xiao Lai¹, watch the surroundings carefully. Don't let the other teachers discover our tracks," arranged the leader decisively.

"Yes, Leader!" The scanning teacher Xiao Lai received the command.

The leader waved a hand behind himself, and five figures disappeared instantly from the area with several hushed swishes.

Meanwhile, in the direction of true north, Ling Lan was sprinting across the ground, instructing Little Four inside the mindsphere to help her find the most appropriate hunting grounds.

"Little Four, here?" Ling Lan abruptly stopped her steps and asked Little Four.

"Yes. There are no scout students at all within 1000 metres of this area." Although Little Four did not know why Ling Lan was so concerned about the presence of scout students, as a follower, he had a responsibility to meet his boss's requests.

"Alright, then let's wait here for prey to come!" The hunting grounds Ling Lan had chosen was a large, dense forest deep within the academy. This area was already far from the various large dormitories — a typical person would not choose to come to this sort of dark and desolate place, unless they were students who were trying to be clever and hide for the whole 24 hours of the grand armed melee.

With a few flying leaps, Ling Lan disappeared soundlessly into the forest.

Not even a minute later, the team of five teachers appeared where Ling Lan had disappeared.

"Right here. A minute ago, the monitoring device detected his figure here. He entered the forest and disappeared from this point," Xiao Lai pointed at the direction where Ling Lan disappeared.

"Can we not find his precise hiding spot?" The leader looked out into the quiet forest and asked.

"No way to pinpoint it. This place has almost no monitoring facilities, unless we mobilise the satellite system of the mainframe," said Xiao Lai regretfully, "I still cannot hack into the Central Scout Academy's mainframe to obtain its control rights... its level is no less than the mainframes of our military headquarters."

The leader said then, "Only a minute has passed. He can't have gotten far. Let's chase!" That said, he was the first to jump into the forest. His team members did not hesitate, jumping into the forest with him. They were just going in to handle a 13 year old babe, they had no worries about strategizing to avoid forests or any disadvantageous locations.

The group dashed far a length of ground, until when the leader suddenly halted and closed his eyes, carefully sensing the environment around him.

"The other's presence suddenly disappeared. How did he do it?" The leader's expression was dismayed. If the target escaped this time, they would find it very difficult to explain things when they returned. It should be known that chances to finish off the other without leaving obvious traces were extremely rare; so, their ringleader had already given the execution order — that brat had to die in this grand armed melee.

"Could it be that we chased too far and overtook him?" asked one of the team members. They absolutely could not believe that a 13 year old plus child could beat them in terms of travel speed.

"Of course not!" The leader harrumphed. He could sense the disturbances where the other had entered and moved through the forest, so of course this was impossible.

However, he also believed that, with their speed, it was impossible for them not to have caught up to the other. Thus, the most likely possibility was that the other had a kind of miraculous concealment method, and was hiding somewhere at the side to avoid their detection.

"He should be close by! Let us spread out and search. Search properly, don't overlook any suspicious places." The leader made a decision instantly. "Also, don't forget what we came here to do..."

The leader swept a cold look over all the team members. "Kill him. Don't be soft-hearted and show any mercy! That is our mission!"

"Yes, leader!" The four of them acknowledged the orders. Their initially somewhat relaxed expressions instantly became serious. They each chose a separate direction and then began slowly searching outwards.

"As expected, they are here to kill us..." Inside Ling Lan's mindspace, Little Four dutifully projected what all 5 of the men were doing.

"Argh, why are that fellow's movements so accurate? He's about to find us!" Little Four jumped up in fright inside the learning space.

"Don't panic!" Ling Lan consoled Little Four. She peered intently at one of the teachers — well, let's just call them teachers for now — who was already very close to her location... she needed to find an opportunity to land a one-hit killing blow.

The moment these people got close, Ling Lan knew she was facing the second great crisis in her life ever since that first assassination attempt when she was six. These five people were all combat experts in the middle to late stages of Qi-Jin. In particular, that team leader had even fully mastered the Qi-Jin stage, like her, and was just waiting for that last catalyst to spark the insight to enter a new domain.

The other was getting closer and closer to her hiding spot, yet Ling Lan's heart was becoming increasingly calmer. Her heartbeat slowed immensely, almost going into a state of hibernation as she laid there unmoving.

One step, two steps, three steps... the other was already right in front of her. The shoes on his feet almost stomped on her fingers, but even so, Ling Lan's heart was still as clear as ice. Unafraid even if the sky collapsed, she did not move a single inch.

Just as the other was about to approach one step further, the neighbouring shrubs about a metre away suddenly rustled. That person instantly turned with a look of caution upon his face, ready to go and investigate the situation over there. Right then,

Ling Lan moved!

Ling Lan's right hand was gripping a conical weapon, transparent in colour and emitting a trace of cold air — it was an ice cone made via the use of Ice Affinity. At present, this was the largest weapon Ling Lan could condense with her talent. Hmm? You ask, wasn't Ling Lan's right hand broken? Why can she still use a weapon?

Well, apparently, when she had met Zhang Jing-an's punch with a punch, Ling Lan's right arm had been unharmed. She had just pretended it was injured to give the impression of weakness, as for who would fall for it... that was not something Ling Lan needed to consider.

However, the ice cone in her right hand was not Ling Lan's most reliable weapon; her real killing move was a spiritual charge.

In this generation, spiritual attacks were an ability that only combat experts at the Domain stage or ace operators could possibly have. Take a good look, they could only 'possibly have' it. Indeed, both these parties must possess immense spiritual power and ability to advance that far, however, just having the spiritual power for it did not mean they could use spiritual power attacks. Only if they awakened an innate talent in this vein could they possess this ability. For example, the spectre ability gained from spiritual mutation was a type of spiritual attack.

However, Ling Lan was an oddball. She did not awaken any spiritual attack type innate talent, but because she had the instruction of the learning space, she had gained this formless yet powerful killing move through masochistic training. This was also why Ling Lan dared to hunt the 5 people after her who were Qi-Jin stage experts like her.

In fact, the rustling of the shrubs that pulled the opponent's attention had also been Ling Lan's doing via manipulation of her spiritual power. Undoubtedly, this time, Ling Lan had planned very well. All the reactions of the opponent were within her calculations.

A fierce spiritual charge would cause the opponent's head to be struck by an abrupt force. Zhang Jing-an, who had just stepped into the early stages of Qi-Jin, had fallen unconscious without being able to put up any resistance²; however, this teacher before her, who was already at the mid-stages of Qi-Jin, was only stunned for 2 seconds before regaining consciousness.

But these 2 short seconds were enough for Ling Lan to kill the opponent several times over. The ice cone created by Ice Affinity plunged mercilessly into the other's chest. Ling Lan did not hesitate at all after her successful strike, backing off instantly. Without even glancing at what would become of the opponent, she left!

That last strike had already revealed her killing intent. If she lingered for even a beat, she would be surrounded by the other 4 people. At that time, she would truly be put in a tight spot with the odds against her.

The moment Ling Lan left, the ice cone piercing the other's chest shattered, becoming countless translucent and glittering spots of light to disappear into the air. Without the continued support of Ling Lan's Ice Affinity, the ice cone had no way of maintaining its shape; this was also a reason for Ling Lan to choose weapons created via Ice Affinity. In the end, only these 5 people would know what her killing weapon was ³.

"Xiao Lai!" Rushing over, the leader yelled out in shock. It turned out that the first team member killed by Ling Lan just happened to be Xiao Lai, the one who had awakened a hacking innate talent and who could hack into the monitoring systems to track her. As hacking talents belonged to the spiritual series of awakened talents, Xiao Lai had had great resistance against Ling Lan's spiritual charge. However, he was still not completely immune to Ling Lan's spiritual charge, and so had finally died under Ling Lan's sneak attack.

Fearfully, Xiao Lai pressed desperately on the wound at his chest, trying to staunch the blood gushing out, as he mumbled over and over again, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die..." They had initially thought that this was an extremely easy mission — they only had to kill a 13 year old scout, and they were all elite soldiers...

"Xiao Lai, hold on!" The team leader took out some medicinal agents and fed them to the other. However, he too knew that it was useless. Unless they could get supplementary blood to maintain the other's minimum blood level within the next 3 minutes, and then obtain a replacement heart within 2 hours, even a god would be unable to save him.

But now, they were in the Central Scout Academy. Moreover, they were impersonating teachers to assassinate a student within the academy. They had no way of requesting emergency aid, and so had no way of receiving assistance. In other words, the leader had no way of bringing Xiao Lai back to their own territory within 3 minutes.

Hiding at one side, Ling Lan bit down fiercely on her own palm, hoping the pain could alleviate the discomfort she felt in her heart. The person she had just killed was not the virtual humans created by the learning space, and neither was he an enemy nation mecha warrior like on planet Demonbeast, nor was he a traitor who had betrayed her trust.

He was very likely just a regular soldier who did not know the truth beforehand, someone who had just simply accepted a mission... yet, she could not be merciful just because of this. She could not die. She definitely could not die. Early on, she had already made a vow — in this life, she wanted to live safely, securely, and freely. If anyone tried to interfere with this goal, she would not care even if she had to morph into a demon to defend it...

"Leader! Is this mission really right?" asked Xiao Lai, eyes filled with doubt as he breathed his last.

"Xiao Lai!" The team leader howled lowly, tears falling silently from the corners of his eyes. Just as Xiao Lai had said, was this mission really right? Why did they have to kill a half-grown kid? Could it be because the child's father had betrayed the country, so they suspected the child would also become a traitor? Why did they have to go so far to prevent something yet to be decided?

The team leader slowly closed Xiao Lai's wide open eyes. When he lifted his head once more, his gaze was sharp and cold, "Xiao Lai, until now you do not understand. We do not need to know what is right or wrong. Once you've entered the organisation, the mission is number one! Don't worry, I will kill him and avenge you. A comrade's blood is not wastefully spilled." The team leader's killing intent became thick and overbearing. His entire aura gradually began to fluctuate and become unstable, even showing faint signs of going berserk.

Chapter 169

Demon?

Seeing this, a thought flitted through Ling Lan's mind. The leader's aura was in a chaotic state, causing him to lose his usual composure... this was definitely a great opportunity to kill him. But just when Ling Lan was about to make her move, three figures flew towards them from three different directions.

"Leader!" shouted one of the team members.

Meanwhile, another team member saw the blood-soaked Xiao Lai laying in the leader's arms, and could not help but cry out in dismay, "Xiao Lai!"

Still in hiding, Ling Lan quietly lamented the lost opportunity. If those three people had come just 5 seconds later, she would have had enough time to make her move. Ling Lan was a decisive person. Seeing that there was no longer any possibility of launching a sneak attack, she once again muffled all signs of her presence, sinking down to hide like an inanimate object.

The team leader pushed down the sorrow and rage he felt in his heart, and said through gritted teeth, "Xiao Lai was the target of a sneak attack by the opponent. He's dead! The opponent is proficient at concealment and assassination. You must all be careful." His turmoil had only lasted for a moment. By now, he had already regained his calm, and immediately deduced Ling Lan's general position. "He shouldn't be far from here. From the time I sensed killing intent and rushed here, only 3 seconds have passed. He would not have had the time to go too far."

The team leader believed that although he had been thrown into mental turmoil by Xiao Lai's death, he had not lost his sensory abilities. If Ling Lan had chosen to run away back then, he would definitely have sensed the boy's movements. But when he had arrived at the scene, the surroundings had been still and silent. That meant that the other must have chosen to lay low somewhere close by.

Perhaps, the boy was just by their sides now, just waiting for a chance to strike a killing blow.

"From now on, the three of you shall be one team. When you search, don't stray too far from the others. It's best if you all can keep an eye out for each other." The team leader knew that the other three members of his team were at about the same level of strength as Xiao Lai. As such, they would be in danger if they got stranded on their own, so he decided to let the three of them search as a group. As for himself... if the opponent thought that he was a good target on his own, he would let that punk know that, before true strength, any brilliant sneak attacks or assassination attempts were all futile.

"Yes, Leader!" acknowledged all three men with serious expressions. Xiao Lai's death had raised their guards; they were not confident that they would be able to evade the opponent's undetectable sneak attack on their own.

Ling Lan saw the four of them split up into two teams and start searching in two different directions. Ling Lan's luck was undoubtedly excellent — the first directions the two parties began searching in were coincidentally not where she was hiding. Of course, this was just a temporary reprieve. When the two parties did not find anything in the directions they were searching right now, they would definitely circle back to search the places they had not covered on their first run. In other words, if Ling Lan just continued to hide here, she would still eventually be discovered by the opponents.

Ling Lan considered her options, and then decided to find a chance to trail that group of three. Although on the surface, going after the team leader to try and execute an assassination seemed more likely to succeed, Ling Lan somehow had an unexplainable feeling in her heart that there was something dangerous about that team leader. It was this sense of danger that made her give up on trying to sneak attack that team leader immediately.

Of course, for Ling Lan to launch a sneak attack on the three-man team without being caught was also very difficult. However, Ling Lan believed that as long as she was patient and focused, it may not be impossible.

Right then, a gust of wind swept by, shaking the leaves on the trees, causing them to rustle loudly. With a light push of her palms, Ling Lan sprang off the ground and flew towards the direction where the three-man team had gone...

When the wind died down, Ling Lan drifted softly to land like a leaf, dashing into another concealed spot to continue hiding once more... Ling Lan's patience was extremely high — even though she still could not see hide or hair of the three-man

team, the moment the wind stopped blowing, she would stop moving as well, and would remain still until the next gust swept by.

On the other end, the team leader was searching with his head bowed. His ears twitched with the sounds of the wind. Though his face remained expressionless, doubt flashed briefly through his eyes...

He actually could not hear anything out of place. Other than the sounds of the wind, and the rustling of leaves, all he could hear was the sound of their own footsteps as they traipsed through the dry grass. Could he have made an error in judgment? Was the opponent still choosing to hide at his original spot and not planning to try another sneak attack? Or had he perhaps already gotten close to them, and he just could not hear it?

The leader's expression became grim. Just then, a tendril of fog abruptly appeared in the forest. It slowly became thicker and thicker, until the leader's figure was hidden within this dense patch of white fog.

The members of the three-man team kept the instructions of their leader close to heart; the distance between them never exceeded 10 metres. Not only that, they each also made sure to keep one team member within sight at all times. This was the triangular formation unique to the Federation military, and it was considered a defensive formation with no blind spots.

Ling Lan continued to use the sound of the wind as cover, sneaking up stealthily to the three-man team. However, she was not happy. Instead, her brows were tightly furrowed, because she had noticed that under this formation, she would have no chance whatsoever to try a sneak attack.

She needed to mess up this formation as soon as possible! Ling Lan knew she did not have a lot of time. Little Four, who had been keeping an eye on the leader, had just told her that he had lost track of the leader. Although Little Four was using high-definition satellite monitoring to scan the area where the team leader had disappeared, that area had already become a thick cloud of fog. Under these circumstances, even the most high-definition satellite would be ineffective.

Ling Lan reckoned that the fog was part of the other's innate talent ability. Under the

cover of the fog, perhaps the other had already turned back and was rushing here at full speed. Meanwhile, she not only had to find a way to finish off these three people in front of her as soon as possible, she still had to beware the aftermath. She did not want to be like the tragic mantis which stalks a cicada, unaware of the oriole behind it 1.

A gust of wind swept by, causing the shrubs and trees around to sway gently, rustling. At the start, the three-man team had been in a state of paranoia, which then toned down to nervous caution... and now, they were calm. At this play of the wind, they merely cast brief glances reflexively at those areas which emitted sound.

Seeing this, an idea sparked in Ling Lan's mind...

The three men saw nothing strange and so continued to walk and search. Not long after, another draft swept by, and like before, the trees and shrubs emitted a round of choppy noises — but this time, an almost imperceptible object shot out along with this gust of wind.

Taking advantage of the wind, Ling Lan had sent an extremely thin and small, yet extremely sharp, ice needle flying out at the team member closest to her. At this time, the other's range of sight just happened to turn towards some source of sound. Moreover, the direction of this turn just happened to expose his most defensively weak temple to Ling Lan.

Ever since humans have used gene agents to spur the development of the body, their bodies' vitality and resistance had been strengthened greatly in comparison to that of Ling Lan's previous world 10,000 years ago. Thus, besides the areas of the head and brain, there were no longer any fatal weaknesses on any other part of the body.

If Ling Lan wanted to rely on this extremely thin ice needle to give the opponent a death blow at any other part of the body, that was almost impossible. Only by shooting it straight into the head to destroy the other's brain could it achieve a killing effect. Just like how Ling Lan had killed that Twilight Empire mecha operator on planet Demonbeast — using a short wooden needle to pierce through the other's lower jaw diagonally to penetrate the brain, killing the opponent by destroying the other's brain. Otherwise, just purely piercing the throat may not necessarily guarantee the other's death.

Compared to the layers of defense shielding a mecha operator's head, this three-man

team before her, due to their disguise as teachers, had not donned any defense for their heads. This gave Ling Lan the possibility of achieving one-hit kills.

Ling Lan's ice needle was truly too small and thin, and on top of that, she had used the sound of the wind to cover its tracks — only when the ice needle was no more than 10 millimetres away from the opponent did his expression twist in realisation.

No matter how much she tried to hide the attack within the sound of the wind, a Qi-Jin level combat expert would have a defensive Qi flow around him, so when the attack approached this Qi flow, it would be noticed by the opponent. This was also why Ling Lan had chosen to do a close-range assassination at the start with Xiao Lai. After all, hidden weapons were not very effective against Qi-Jin experts who were on their guard.

That person was just about to move his head to dodge the attack, when Ling Lan's long prepared spiritual attack followed. This time, her spiritual attack was not as intense as the one she had used against Xiao Lai, which could cause someone to fall unconscious directly. Instead, this attack would only concuss the head of the target, making him lose control of his movements, briefly paralyzing the other.

It would only last for a split second; the target would be back to normal almost immediately. However, this one split second was enough — with fear and shock, the opponent found that it was too late to dodge!

The ice needle plunged soundlessly into the opponent's temple, leaving no trace except an extremely minuscule red dot where it had entered... as well as that rictus of horror right before the moment of death!

In the meantime, the other two people did not notice that anything had happened. They continued to search ahead, still staying in their triangular formation. But after walking a few steps, they realised that one of their members on one of the corners had trailed behind...

One of the remaining members stopped and shouted out doubtfully, "Xiao Lin, did you find something? Why aren't you keeping up?"

Xiao Lin just continued to stand there unmoving, staring off fixedly at a spot, as if he had found something.

The two of remaining members looked at one another, then agreed tacitly to go over

to take a look. They carefully made their way over and one of them walked right up to Xiao Lin's side. He nudged Xiao Lin on the shoulder and said, "Hey, why aren't you answering?"

Unexpectedly, this nudge caused Xiao Lin's entire body to fall forwards. The two men were shocked — one of them quickly got into a defensive pose nervously, while the other moved forwards to check on their companion, only to find that Xiao Lin had stopped breathing...

"Ahh... that goddamn bastard, you need to f*ckin' come out and show yourself! What kind of hero attacks from the shadows?! Come fight me one on one if you have the guts!" That person leapt up abruptly, screaming out into the dimly lit forest hysterically. He was thoroughly frightened by this silent and unexpected passing of Xiao Lin.

"Xiao Chong², calm down!" the other team member yelled anxiously, looking around warily all the while. The surroundings were quiet and still, not a figure in sight...

"Leader! Leader!" bellowed the hysterical team member, hoping that his team leader would hurry over to investigate the cause of Xiao Lin's death.

However, all that answered him was still silence. Even his leader was nowhere to be seen or heard. The hysterical team member gradually calmed down, but his complexion also grew increasingly paler. He could not help but think: Could it be that their team leader had also already been killed silently and unexpectedly like this?

He shook his head emphatically. No, the leader was so strong and formidable. He definitely wouldn't be offed by a 13 year old child... but, was their target really just a 13 year old child? Or perhaps the one behind the deaths of his comrades was not their target at all? Perhaps it was a demon?

He thought of that large hole in Xiao Lai's chest that had been created by an unknown weapon, and then looked down again at Xiao Lin laying on the ground without a mark on him. All he could see was the terrified expression on Xiao Lin's face, as if he had seen something horrific right before he died...

Chapter 170

Split-Core Twofold Detonation Technique!

"Xiao Fei, there was clearly no one around earlier, but Xiao Lin still died, even leaving with such an expression on his face. Our opponent isn't human!" Although science and technology explained that there were no ghosts and spirits in this world, the bizarre nature of Xiao Lin's death had still caused Xiao Chong to panic. "Right now, even the leader has disappeared! He must have died at the hands of that terrifying demon too! If we continue to stay here, we'll definitely die!" Facing such a creepy situation, even a braver man would be affected by fear.

"Slap!" Xiao Fei threw a tight slap across Xiao Chong's face. In reaction, Xiao Chong gaped, expression still anxious, confused, and helpless.

"You need to godd*mn calm down!" barked Xiao Fei, "The leader had mentioned that the opponent is good at concealment and assassination, so it's not surprising that he knows some methods that we cannot understand. But this doesn't mean he's invincible!"

"Besides, I don't believe the leader has really been finished off." Xiao Fei knew his leader's capabilities very well — if even the leader could not resist, then they would really have no chance of leaving this forest alive. He told himself that he must remain calm. The moment the both of them got caught up in panic, then death would really be at their heels.

Xiao Fei's calm and steady words finally lessened Xiao Chong's panic. His gaze began to rove, but just as he was about to say something, he suddenly saw the bushes about 10 metres behind Xiao Fei burst apart soundlessly. Countless blades of grass and leaves shot out like arrows at Xiao Fei's back.

"Watch out!" Xiao Chong's previous panic was wiped away instantly. A cold light shone from his eyes as he pushed Xiao Fei gently to one side with his left hand. Then, lifting his right hand, he charged towards the bush the attack had come from. A formless blast of Qi-Jin, and the grass and leaves flying towards them were instantly obstructed.

A muffled "bang!" — the two invisible forces collided. Xiao Chong's body was shaken

by the blast, and he felt the breath and blood in his chest roil... calmly, he circulated the hidden force in his body, and once more gathered the energy at his palms to push out at the opposing force once more...

The addition of this burst of Qi-Jin finally suppressed that formless energy, and the grass and leaves frozen in the air were immediately thrown back from whence they came.

Hiding in the opposite direction, when the muffled blast rang out, Ling Lan's complexion paled, as if sustaining some great blow. However, her expression did not change and her vision did not waver. She still kept her eyes coolly focused on the other team member, the one who had been pushed aside by Xiao Chong, Xiao Fei.

That's right, her target this time was none other than Xiao Fei. The flying grasses and leaves earlier were indeed her tactic, but that move was just a feint, an intentional attack to lure the attention of Xiao Chong.

Although Xiao Chong's surface panic had looked very real, the invisible bloody aura lingering about them proved that these people were all veterans who were used to bloodshed. How could they be so easily frightened by a comrade's unexplained death? His performance was undoubtedly meant to lull Ling Lan and try to entice her into attacking.

After figuring things out, Ling Lan decided to just play along. Even though she risked getting injured this way, she would obtain another chance to kill off yet another one of her opponents. This was an undoubtedly worthy exchange.

Right after Xiao Chong blasted away those grasses and leaves, with no hesitation, he stomped on the ground, and using the reaction force generated from it, he pounced towards the area that had been blasted apart. Both his palms were thrust forward, formless Qi-Jin behind them as he struck out!

Since the formless force had come from this direction, then the opponent must definitely be hiding there! He had caught the killer! Glee flashed through Xiao Chong's eyes. As long as the opponent exposed himself, based on the strength he had sensed from their last encounter, Xiao Chong was confident that he would definitely be able to kill the other by working together with Xiao Fei.

With a loud "Boom!", dirt was thrown up into the air along with shrubbery as the

ground was blasted apart by the force of his attack. At the end of it, a deep pit of about a metre wide in diameter laid before Xiao Chong.

"A good opportunity! Explode!" At this moment, Ling Lan, who had been hiding to one side, saw Xiao Chong leave the side of the other team member, and immediately detonated the spiritual power she had planted by Xiao Fei's side.

Ling Lan was not confident that she could kill two Qi-Jin experts at the same time with a spiritual blast. In comparison with Xiao Chong's late stage Qi-Jin strength, Xiao Fei with his early mid-stage Qi-Jin strength was undoubtedly easier to kill. Therefore, from the very start, her target had always been Xiao Fei — always start from cartilage when gnawing on bones ¹, after all.

The formless and colourless spiritual power, under Ling Lan's control, exploded in an instant, creating a massive shockwave aimed straight for Xiao Fei's brain.

Xiao Fei, who had been pushed to one side by Xiao Chong, had already been in defensive mode. His attention was currently focused on Xiao Chong's attack — the moment he noticed any sign of the opponent, he would follow up with an attack of his own and help Xiao Chong.

However, before he could notice anything, tremors abruptly coursed through his mind. This was a warning signal, an ability of every fighter who managed to enter Qi-Jin stage. Could it be that the opponent was trying to launch a sneak attack on him?

This notion had barely passed Xiao Fei's mind when the hidden force spread out across his body ballooned rapidly — if anyone or any hidden weapons approached him, he would be able to sense it...

But even as he pulled this defensive action, he felt a formless energy collide with the defensive hidden force on his body... He felt his Qi-Jin shudder violently, and then waves of dizziness and disorientation invaded his brain. As if from a distance, he felt like he could hear his own Qi-Jin being detonated by that surge of energy. Boom! Boom! Boom!...

These concussive forces were focused on attacking his brain. In the end, he felt his brain succumb to these overwhelming energy surges, and with a last roaring blast, it exploded... he thoroughly descended into darkness and knew no more.

On the other side, Xiao Chong, who was attacking the source of the attacking energy,

thought that his two Qi-infused palms would force out the killer hiding within the shrubs. However, other than flying dirt and grass, there was no one to be found... besides the rustling sounds of the trees and plants stirred by the wind, there was nothing else in the surroundings.

"Damn it!" Seeing his two palms not having their intended effect, Xiao Chong could not help but curse silently, heart doubtful. Had the killer snuck away in the very moment he had launched his sneak attack at Xiao Fei? But he had not heard anyone moving at all! Or could it be that that person had never been there to begin with? In that case, then how had that attack been created?

Sure enough, Xiao Chong was not as flustered as he had appeared to be. Or, more accurately, his previous weak performance was just meant to put the killer hiding in the shadows at ease and get him to attack.

He had indeed gotten his wish. The opponent had struck, but the outcome was not ideal. He did not manage to frisk out the opponent, which made him even more uncertain and lost than before.

He moodily walked back to his teammate's side. Of course, along the way, he did not forget to stay vigilant — he believed that the killer was still nearby. It was only that the killer had a mysterious way of moving and hiding, causing him to be unable to find an opening, so fear began taking root in his heart.

"Xiao Fei, did you find anything?" he asked softly. Xiao Fei had been standing behind him all this while defending, perhaps he had seen something.

Unfortunately, there was no response to his question. Sensing something off, Xiao Chong's expression changed drastically. He rushed over to stand before Xiao Fei and was treated to the sight of Xiao Fei's wide open eyes staring off sightlessly into the distance. Meanwhile, thin rivulets of blood were flowing ceaselessly from Xiao Fei's eyes, nose, ears, and mouth... With just one glance, Xiao Chong could tell that the other was already dead.

"Aaaah!!" Xiao Chong howled mournfully. Compared to the other teammates, he and Xiao Fei had grown up together, attended school together, fought their first battle together, and survived together. They were the best of sworn brothers. His death caused Xiao Chong to go utterly berserk...

Hiding within the grass, Ling Lan's current condition was not optimistic either. Her face was as white as paper — that last spiritual blast had undoubtedly drained her spiritual power. Not only that, a spiritual blast was also an attack which extracted a heavy toll on oneself even as it dealt great damage to the opponent ². Moreover, the attack she used this time — the split-core twofold detonation technique — actually had an even higher requirement than a regular spiritual blast, with a correspondingly higher damage output.

Though the power of a spiritual blast was indeed very strong, it had a weakness — after it was activated once, the user would not be able to accumulate spiritual power again for a short period to continue attacking. Thus, if Ling Lan used a spiritual blast to attract the opponent's attention, then she would have no way of immediately gathering spiritual strength again to launch another sneak attack. In order to successfully kill off one of her opponents, she could only take a risk and use the split-core twofold detonation technique.

The split-core twofold detonation technique was an area-of-effect technique. It split her spiritual power into two portions, which could then be detonated separately to attack a target. The immense turbulence caused by the twofold blasts of spiritual power could instantly destroy anything tangible or intangible within a certain range.

Ling Lan knew well that that missing team leader was most certainly on his way here. There was no time for her to continue wasting; she needed to finish off these two people before the team leader arrived. Otherwise, up against that leader at the peak of Qi-Jin, Ling Lan had no confidence she would be able to stand up to him even one-on-one, much less if the other still had a helper remaining.

Ling Lan believed that, by using the split-core twofold detonation technique, she would definitely be able to kill off at least one of her opponents. And in reality, Ling Lan had done it. However, the cost was also very high. Not only was her spiritual power depleted, her head ached fiercely, feeling as if it were splitting apart, causing her to feel like puking. Even her physical body sustained a little damage. The only blessing was, setting her spiritual power aside, her combat ability had not been decreased by much.

"Boss, you cannot use any more spiritual power." Checking on Ling Lan's condition, Little Four spoke up to caution her, "Forcefully using any more will cause irreparable long-term damage to your spiritual self."

"Understood!" replied Ling Lan. Her gaze was fixed on the grieving and berserk Xiao Chong. His aura had started to fluctuate; this was undoubtedly a good time to attack...

Since she already had no way of using spiritual attacks anymore, then all she could do was charge in. With a strong push of her arms, she flew like an arrow towards Xiao Chong who was still howling mournfully up into the sky.

At the same time, a cone-shaped icicle appeared in her hands, and in a split second, she was at the opponent's back.

In fact, Ling Lan already long knew that the so-called innate talents from spiritual mutation actually had very little to do with how strong one's spiritual power was. It was just that the innate talents possessed by a body required spiritual power to trigger. Although Ling Lan's spiritual power was depleted, she still had the tiny bit of spiritual power needed to activate Ice Affinity to make this small icicle...

At that moment, the wailing Xiao Chong abruptly turned around. He glared at Ling Lan with bloodshot eyes and shouted, "You've finally appeared!"

Chapter 171

I Want to Live!

The opponent's hand unerringly grasped hold of Ling Lan's right hand which was stabbing towards him, a savage smile appearing on his lips.

It's a trap! Ling Lan realised instantly that the other's unstable aura and his frenzied wailing had all been a sham — all for the sake of getting her to attack!

A piercing glint flashed through Ling Lan's eyes. Regardless of whether the other had done this intentionally or not, at this moment, there was no longer any possibility of a sneak attack.

Defenceless, an unexpected spiritual charge could indeed cause a target to lose control of their actions for a brief second, allowing her to carry off a one-hit kill. However, once the opponent had their guard up, then a spiritual charge, which was not very strong, would not be able to cause the opponent to lose control. Consecutive assassinations had thoroughly raised her opponents' guard, which was also why Ling Lan had chosen to use a spiritual blast instead of a spiritual charge when she had killed Xiao Fei.

Thus, for this attack, she had had no choice but to try her luck in a direct confrontation. She only hoped that she could at least deal heavy damage to the opponent, if she could not kill him, before the team leader arrived, so he would be unable to continue fighting.

Although Ling Lan's right hand was in the opponent's grip, she reacted extremely quickly. Her left hand abruptly swept towards the other's neck, and at the tips of her fingers, an extremely small and thin ice needle was revealed. Against an opponent at the same level of Qi-Jin, even an ice needle, which did not look that sturdy, could give the opponent a fatal wound.

His brief but full-on contact with Ling Lan let Xiao Chong know that this seemingly 13 year old youth before him was actually at a similar level of strength as him. He was also a Qi-Jin level combat expert. Thus, Xiao Chong did not dare to take any risks. With a forceful spring of his legs, he dodged that glittering, cold ice needle of the opponent. But in doing so, his right hand had no choice but to let go of Ling Lan.

He thought that the opponent would take the chance to escape — most assassins who were proficient in the various methods of assassination would choose to distance themselves immediately if their attempt failed. Thus, right after he dodged the other's ice needle, he came to an abrupt stop, aiming to stop the other when he tried to escape.

Regaining free use of her right hand, Ling Lan did not run away as he expected; instead, she chose to get even closer, throwing out a fierce elbow in his direction.

Because Xiao Chong had chosen to stop, he had no room at all to dodge again. He had no choice but to cross his arms and forcefully take the opponent's blow.

An audible thud! Both sides had used their full strength — when the two hidden forces collided, loud explosions could be heard. As Xiao Chong had blocked Ling Lan's attack in a hurry, his Qi had not been as substantial as Ling Lan's. Xiao Chong felt his feet become unsteady, and stumbled back three consecutive steps before the force he had received faded. Even so, he felt a heaviness in his chest as his Qi roiled, and he almost threw up a mouthful of blood.

During the collision, Ling Lan's face drained of its colour. However, she had indisputably won the upper hand in this encounter. So, pressing her advantage, she closed the gap as the other retreated, once again getting up close and personal.

"Godd*mmit!" Xiao Chong had yet to find his footing when he saw the opponent attacking once more. Swearing loudly, he did not choose to dodge this time, but instead clenched his fists and struck out fiercely at the opponent. He just knew that offense was the best defense — otherwise, he would forever be passively defending against the other's attacks, completely losing the chance to fight back.

Ling Lan saw the opponent's fist coming at her, but did not evade it. Instead, she used her left hand to intercept the opponent's punch, and then, her right fist swung out...

A flash of joy passed through Xiao Chong's gaze. Similarly, his left hand intercepted Ling Lan's fist, and the two of them were instantly in a deadlock. Undoubtedly, Ling Lan's choice this time was advantageous to Xiao Chong. From his initial passive disadvantaged position, he had now risen to be on equal footing with Ling Lan again.

Right then, Ling Lan's entire body leaned backwards, and a trace of a smirk played on the corners of her lips...

"Not good!" Warning bells began to ring in Xiao Chong's heart. Without having to think

about it, he retreated swiftly, trying to dodge the threat.

But it was already too late — he felt a heavy force striking his abdomen, and then he was sent flying backwards. In mid-air, a mouthful of blood sprayed from his mouth. Ling Lan had used the move she was extremely proficient in by now — Rabbit Sky Leap. Now, her Rabbit Sky Leap no longer had a mere strength increase of 3 times, but 7.

Rabbit Sky Leap was definitely a great skill; its power was formidable and it was extremely subtle. Unfortunately, this skill could not be used consecutively. Because the recoil from executing the Rabbit Sky Leap was too strong, Ling Lan's body could not take the repeated battering of this force. She needed some time to recover before using it again, otherwise it would be too easy for Ling Lan's legs to become permanently damaged.

Even though Xiao Chong had already achieved the late stage of Qi-Jin, bearing the full measure of this powerful kicking force, he was still injured badly.

About to hit the ground, Ling Lan twisted to one side and slapped her right hand against the ground to push herself upright again, once again flying towards Xiao Chong. She swung a long readied fist.

Subtle vibrations could be seen running through Ling Lan's right arm, being transmitted to her fist. This was a combat special skill she had redeemed with honour points from the learning space early on —— Wave Stacking Strike!

Wave Stacking Strike stacked the body's hidden force layer by layer onto one's fist. From just 2 layers at the start, Ling Lan could now stack up to 6 layers, which meant that she could attack a target with up to 6 times her normal Qi-Jin.

Ling Lan knew very well that a woman's physical strength was naturally weaker than a man's — to become strong in her own right, besides needing to make sure her combat skills were better than her competitors, she similarly could not lose in terms of strength to those men. In order to make up for this natural deficit, in choosing her techniques, she leant towards those skills which involved power stacking. This was a reason why she had redeemed the Wave Stacking Strike from the learning space.

Xiao Chong saw the opponent's fist hurtling towards him and he grimaced. In the air, he had no way to change directions and dodge, and so could only take the blow. With

a shout, he threw out his own fist, prepared to duke it out with Ling Lan.

A loud "Boom!" The two Qi-Jins crashed into one another and the energy swept outwards in a ring. The surrounding trees could not take this powerful force; they all began to lean towards the outside, and a countless number just broke apart under the pressure to fly out.

"Wah!" In mid-air, Xiao Chong once again spewed a lance of blood. He was thrown backwards at a speed greater than before. Only when he slammed violently into a large tree did his body stop moving.

He slowly slid down the tree trunk to kneel on the ground! Meanwhile, the tree he had slammed into had clear cracks spreading out on its bark where he had landed — it was obvious how forcefully he had slammed into it.

In the meeting of the two fists, although Ling Lan had the initiative as well as the support of the Wave Stacking Strike, she still sustained damage. Being thrown backwards, she stumbled two or three steps back and threw up a mouthful of blood. Only then did the roiling of her blood and Qi settle down enough for her to suppress her discomfort.

"Gotta take your life while you're down!" Seeing the opponent already at a critically injured state, only lacking one final blow to end things, Ling Lan showed no mercy. She stepped forwards once more, pouncing like an arrow at the opponent, throwing a palm out at the same time. The moment she finished off the opponent, Ling Lan would once again conceal herself and lay low to wait for her final opponent, the team leader!

Just as Ling Lan stuck out her palm, her heart throbbed abruptly, a never before encountered sense of danger stealing into her mind... unknowingly, heaven knows when, a thin layer of fog had drifted to her side.

"Not good! He's here!" Alarm bells rang in Ling Lan's mind. Her palm abruptly changed directions to strike at the ground, and using that rebound, she retreated with a backflip. Then, as planned, her legs stomped firmly on the ground, sending her body flying at lightspeed into the distance, instantly disappearing from the area.

Ling Lan who had flown over 100 metres away in an instant suddenly felt her body being struck forcefully. Blood sprayed from her mouth, and her body plummeted uncontrollably to crash heavily into the ground.

At this moment, behind Ling Lan, a plume of thick fog appeared. Then, a figure emerged from within it — it was the missing team leader.

"Who knew that in just 5 minutes, you managed to kill Xiao Lin and Xiao Fei. Even Xiao Chong almost could not escape your lethal grasp," said the team leader, expression frigid, "You are indeed a dangerous character."

Ling Lan's internal Qi-Jin had been scattered by that last strike. Right now, her limbs were lifeless, but she did not want to give up. So, she slowly forced herself to climb off the ground and stand up straight. Using the back of a hand to wipe away the blood stains at the corner of her mouth, she said bitterly, "A Domain fighter!" Although the opponent had just entered the Domain stage, this difference of one stage made Ling Lan unable to bear even one attack from the other. "Your luck is truly great, actually having a breakthrough on site."

This also explained why the other had taken up to 5 minutes to come. It was likely that the opponent had been in the middle of his breakthrough in this time, and so could not rush over.

"This is still thanks to you, otherwise I would not have been able to find the catalyst to breakthrough," huffed the team leader. The death of his comrades caused him to be unbearably agonised, leading his already peak Qi-Jin to quake violently, coincidentally causing cracks to appear on the shackled barrier on his development. Initially, he was thinking to finish off the other before finding a place to focus on his breakthrough, but unexpectedly, when he activated his innate talent, he found himself already deep in the process of breakthrough. This made him have no choice but to continue with his breakthrough, which was why he was delayed by 5 minutes, causing him to lose two more comrades. The joy of breaking through could not make up for the pain of losing a comrade — this was why his hate for Ling Lan ran even deeper.

He did not give Ling Lan any chance to continue talking. With a quick flash, he had appeared in front of Ling Lan and was reaching out towards Ling Lan's neck.

Ling Lan tried to dodge the other's hand, but found her body pinned in place by an invisible force, sealing away her ability to move. She could only watch helplessly as the opponent easily wrapped his fingers around her neck.

The team leader effortlessly carried Ling Lan by the neck as he headed back to where Xiao Chong was. The opponent's strength almost suffocated Ling Lan to death.

Although she did not know why the opponent did not just kill her directly, the desire to continue living made Ling Lan secretly run through her Qi exercises, hoping to recover her Qi-Jin quicker and win an opportunity to live.

The team leader very quickly arrived back where Xiao Chong lay. He threw Ling Lan to one side and bent over to check on Xiao Chong's condition. Only then did he let out a breath of relief. Although Xiao Chong's injuries were severe, he wasn't dead, and so could be considered lucky. He took out a tube of medicinal agent from the bag at his waist and fed it to Xiao Chong.

Very quickly, Xiao Chong regained consciousness. Seeing his leader, his eyes turned red and he said, "Leader, Xiao Lin and Xiao Fei are dead." They had been their comrades! On the battlefield, they had not died at the hands of enemy soldiers, but lost their lives here in a common mission to a child... Xiao Chong found this hard to accept.

With similarly red eyes, the team leader glanced at the bodies of Xiao Lin and Xiao Fei lying not too far away and said quietly, "Xiao Chong, I'm sorry. I still came late in the end."

Xiao Chong shakily shook his head, "You can't be blamed, Leader, that bastard is just too despicable!" That said, his expression shifted and he asked, panicked, "Where's the bastard?"

The leader threw a glance at the immobile Ling Lan sitting to one side and said coldly, "I caught him. In a bit, we'll use his blood to honour our fallen comrades."

Hearing this, Xiao Chong nodded his head vigorously. He pushed himself to his feet and slowly made his way to stand before Ling Lan. Grabbing her roughly by the throat, he dragged her to the place where Xiao Lin's and Xiao Fei's bodies lay.

Meanwhile, the team leader took the time to bring the body of Xiao Lai over from his place of death, setting him down together with Xiao Lin and Xiao Fei.

"Xiao Lin, Xiao Fei, Xiao Lai, watch carefully, this is the culprit who killed you all. Now, I will send him over to your world... you all must take proper revenge." As the team leader spoke, silent tears began to fall from his eyes. What he had originally considered a simple and minor mission, had actually ended up with him being separated from his brothers by the boundaries of life and death. In his deep regret, he

also hated Ling Lan for his viciousness. He abruptly turned his head and said stonily, "Xiao Chong, kill him!"

"Yes, Leader!" Xiao Chong's visage was gruesome as his fingers on Ling Lan's throat clenched forcefully.

Ling Lan felt as if she could hear the bones of her neck straining under the pressure, about to shatter... was she really about to die here?

Ling Lan wanted to struggle, she wanted to resist... but her body was still locked tightly, unable to make any motion to resist. Ling Lan knew that this was probably a manifestation of the opponent's Domain — the opponent was not going to give her any chance to escape.

*D*mmit! I want to live, I want to live!* Right before Ling Lan descended into unconsciousness, she roared in her heart!

Chapter 172

Domain Stage?

"Die!" Xiao Chong bellowed, his fingers moving to crush the opponent's throat. But suddenly, he felt his fingers go weak, his entire body feeling somewhat numb and cold. He almost lost his grip on the opponent's neck — fortunately, the opponent was already powerless and unable to struggle, otherwise he might very likely have let the opponent escape.

Could it be that his previous internal injury had affected him? Xiao Chong had just begun to puzzle over the issue when all his confusion was driven away by a wrenching pain in his chest.

He instinctively looked down and was immediately petrified. The first thing he saw was a fair and soft-looking little hand, and in it was a strong-looking heart, still beating... whose heart was it?

Immediately after, his entire face twisted in shock and fear, because he saw that a bloody hole had appeared on his chest. Right then, fresh blood was gushing out from the hole — not only staining his own clothes, but also painting the plot of land he stood on in red... Meanwhile, the small figure standing before him remained spotless. Before any blood could spray onto the other, it would be repelled, as if there was some sphere protecting him.

Xiao Chong's vision once more returned to the heart in that little hand, and his mouth was unbearably dry and bitter. So that vigorous thing was his heart? When had his heart been pulled out from inside his body? And he hadn't felt anything when it happened?

At that moment, another fair and soft-looking little hand touched his wrist and gently pushed his hand away. Only then did Xiao Chong notice that he wasn't gripping onto the other's throat at all. There had been a distance of several millimetres between his fingers and the opponent's throat... he just had not realised it.

After the little hand pushed away his fingers, it lightly patted his cheek. The initially icy and youthful little face of his opponent actually shifted into a smile. The smile was

sweet and lovely, making Xiao Chong feel as if he had seen the sun, blindingly radiant yet so warm that people yearned for it.

"You can die now!" However, what followed the warmth of the sun was only cruel reality.

When this merciless murmur was delivered from behind this beautiful smile, Xiao Chong heard a 'splat', as if something had been crushed. He instinctively looked towards the sound, and then found his entire body gripped by wrenching pain, and his life quickly slipped away.

It turned out that his heart had been crushed by that little hand. He even saw the opponent's fingers pinch and rub it tastelessly for a bit before throwing away the shredded meat with a flick. The opponent's hand then immediately returned to its original pristine condition, not even a speck of blood on it, as if its crushing of the heart had all been in Xiao Chong's mind.

Even scarier was the fact that although the opponent had obviously been committing a horrifying and disgusting thing, the opponent seemed to see it as normal. In his gaze were traces of mockery, taunting, and curiosity — but there was no discomfort or disgust whatsoever, as if the other had long become used to doing such things.

This sort of carefree attitude in playing around with others' lives made Xiao Chong feel as if he had been plunged into icy water, his entire body turning cold... a demon, he was most definitely a demon!

"Leader..." Arduously, Xiao Chong turned his head to look towards his team leader standing at the left to the front of him, as if trying to warn his leader that a demon had come.

Domain stage combat experts were extremely sensitive to being watched. The team leader quickly turned his head and saw Xiao Chong's gruesome and tortured expression. His expression shifted and he swiftly retreated, pulling a distance away from Ling Lan and Xiao Chong. It wasn't that he did not want to save Xiao Chong, but Xiao Chong's gaze was clearly telling him to run. This made the team leader have no choice but to be cautious and try to figure out the situation before making a decision.

As he pulled away from the two, he could finally see Xiao Chong's condition. Both of Xiao Chong's eyes had turned greyish white, utterly dead and lifeless — he had used

up the last of his life to warn his team leader.

The leader's eyes became awash with red, a dark rage sweeping briefly across his face, "Godd*mn, you actually managed to break the bindings of my Domain?"

To prevent any accidents, he had specially used his Domain ability to fully seal Ling Lan's movements, guaranteeing no chance of failure. Who knew he had still underestimated Ling Lan in the end. The opponent had actually managed to break his binding and even kill off his only remaining team member Xiao Chong right before his eyes. This caused him to be both livid and extremely regretful at the same time — he should have just killed the other immediately when he had first caught him, and not brought him back here.

Still smiling radiantly, Ling Lan prodded Xiao Chong who was in front of her with a finger, and then, with a thud, Xiao Chong's stocky body crashed onto the ground.

Only then did the team leader see the cause of Xiao Chong's death. There was a large hole in his chest, blood still flowing from it, and the team leader could also see the mangled bloody flesh on the ground near it. His entire face twisted up, and he cried out, "You're vicious!"

Hearing this, Ling Lan lightly waggled a finger in front of her and said with a grin, "Tsk, tsk, tsk, you're wrong. This is not being vicious, but creating a masterpiece. Look at his lovely expression... normally, you won't ever see such a lovely expression." Ling Lan's smile grew wider. "You should thank me, for letting you see such a rare visage."

"Demon!" howled the team leader, "I'll definitely kill you!" Even as the team leader was filled with hate for Ling Lan, he hated himself for not just killing off this evil demon straightforwardly back then.

"Kill me? Can you kill me?" Ling Lan laughed and shook her head. The opponent's ignorant words were somewhat hilarious from her perspective. Her force of presence abruptly rose significantly, a terrifying and immense wave of pressure descending upon this little forest. The team leader's face fell and he could not help but exclaim, "Domain stage!"

The team leader's words had barely faded when he shook his head emphatically, face filled with disbelief. "This is impossible. He can't have jumped levels to advance into Domain stage. It's not true, this is definitely a lie..." He tried to convince himself that

what he felt from the other's terrifying presence earlier on was just an illusion.

Frankly, the team leader had reason to doubt what he felt. The further one progressed, the more crucial it became to take things a step at a time. In particular, after entering the Refinement stage, every increase in level was built on the accumulation of one's foundations. It was extremely rare for a cross-level advancement to occur, especially for the Qi-Jin stage, where every increase in level needed the accumulation of years of hard work. Take the leader for example, he had been stuck at the optimal peak level of Qi-Jin for a whole 10 years. Although the Domain stage was just a small step away, he had just never found the right catalyst.

If his comrades had not died silently one after another before him, causing his emotions to churn and destabilize his internal energy, which unexpectedly then led to the catalyst of his advancement, he might have lingered on the optimal peak level of Qi-Jin for god knows how many more years...

His advancement had had a certain element of serendipity to it. Still, it wasn't strange — after all, he had already been at the optimal peak level of Qi-Jin; advancement was the natural and logical next step. However, this was not the case for the opponent. When he had exchanged that one move with the opponent, he had learned that the other had already achieved the peak level of Qi-Jin, but was still two ranks away from achieving the optimal peak level. These simple two minor ranks were impossible to overcome without 3 to 5 years of effort — how had he jumped straight into Domain stage in one leap?

Besides that, the Domain aura coming from the opponent was clearly thicker and more substantial than his, just as if the opponent had already entered Domain stage for many years. This was not something an expert who had just entered Domain stage should have — this was completely illogical!

"It wasn't easy to cultivate such a little abnormality, and it was almost ruined at your hands. Just thinking of this, my mood is just terrible. I am not happy at all." Although Ling Lan was saying that she wasn't happy, the smile on her face did not dim in the slightest, instead becoming increasingly brighter. But it was precisely this radiant sunny smile which caused chills to run through the team leader's heart, a never before experienced sense of danger looming in his heart.

"What do you mean?" asked the team leader cautiously. He was naturally very confused right now, somehow just unable to communicate with this seemingly rather

insane child before him.

Ling Lan sighed softly, twirling her hair behind her ear gently with a finger, and said with a smile, "Even if I tell you, you won't understand... it looks like there isn't much time left, let's finish things quickly." That said, he muttered softly to himself, "This lousy body, actually being unable to sustain my emergence for 3 minutes, how horrible... Number Nine, put more effort into it in future and train up this little fellow's body. Make her just a bit stronger."

Inside the mindspace, expression stony, Number Nine warned, "Stop talking nonsense. Still not finishing off the opponent? Do you really want Ling Lan's body to break down because of your dithering?"

Number Nine was very unhappy. Number One had clearly asked her to go handle the opponent, but this punk Number Five had rushed ahead and snatched the initiative. If she were not afraid that forcefully taking control away from Number Five would accelerate the collapse of Ling Lan's body, she would definitely never let him continue to be in control.

Number Nine's strength was the weakest among the nine instructors. Initially, if she had taken control of Ling Lan's body, she would be able to last for at least 7 to 8 minutes; but because of Number Five's insubordination, rushing out on his own, the time limit was shortened to 3 minutes before it would break down. After all, Number Five's power was just too much for Ling Lan's current physical body to support.

It should be known that the greater the difference between the strength of the person in control and that of the host's, the greater the damage to the host. If Number One took control of Ling Lan's body, it probably would take less than a second for Ling Lan's body to collapse completely.

"Fine, being able to just come out for a while is already good enough." Number Five felt that he shouldn't be too greedy now... if Ling Lan's roots were really harmed, he would definitely be pummelled so hard by Big Bro Number One that he would not be able to take care of his daily life ¹, and at worst, his consciousness might just be wiped out completely. A shudder ran through Number Five's body, some fear swirling in his heart. He had just wanted to come out and see their host's world, somehow forgetting about his terrifying big bro.

Number Five decided to finish the fight in a few seconds, and then immediately go turn

himself in to Big Bro for punishment. So, his fingers flicked lightly, and an invisible force blanketed the area for several li. The team leader felt as if he had been congealed in a thick liquid — every move he tried to make required the strength of nine bulls and two tigers ².

"Activate Domain!" The team leader decisively activated his Domain, dispelling the pressure the opponent was forcing upon his body. Furthermore, his body began to become blurred and unfocused as the surrounding forest began to become thick with fog, and then his entire person disappeared within the fog.

Seeing this, Number Five's lips curved up into a smile and he said with a chuckle, "This innate talent... interesting!" That said, he closed his eyes, as if listening intently for something, but also as if unconcerned by what was happening.

Chapter 173

What Kind of Personages?

Suddenly, the thin and wispy fog behind him became substantial, and a sharp blade pierced towards Ling Lan's back. Number Five seemed oblivious — the blade punching right through to burst out of Ling Lan's chest, but strangely enough, the wound caused by the blade did not bleed at all. It was just as if the leader had stabbed a fake person.

"Not good!" From the feedback of sensation from his hand, the team leader knew that he had been duped. This figure before him was not a real person — stabbing it did not feel at all like stabbing through blood and flesh, but like stabbing a person made of straw...

Just when the leader was about to turn into fog once more, he suddenly noticed that countless transparent thin lines had appeared around him, gathering to form a net to wrap around his entire body. His shift into fog was interrupted, and his body was securely bound.

"Ah! Explode!" The team leader was naturally unwilling to just give up and be caught; the Qi-Jin of his body suddenly detonated. Although the transparent thin lines were dense and numerous, they were fortunately not very sturdy. They broke apart one after another under the force of the team leader's exploding Qi-Jin, and the leader took the chance to struggle out of the web around him. Still, because he had failed in turning into fog, his entire body was now real and tangible.

"What Domain is this?" The team leader's face changed subtly; he had never before seen such a Domain, which was actually able to set up such an all-encompassing net within this area.

"Oh, this is just a type of Domain modification..." answered Number Five carelessly. With that reply, his figure instantly turned into a bundle of grass and twigs, breaking apart to drift on the wind. Very quickly, not too far from the leader, the grasses suddenly grew at an insane speed, shooting up and weaving together into one entity, finally changing into the appearance of Ling Lan.

"Plant Replication?" The team leader was startled, and then, as if thinking of something, his expression changed drastically. "Could your spiritual mutation be Plant Manipulation?"

In a forest, encountering a strong fighter with a Plant Manipulation mutation was undoubtedly the scariest thing. This was because the forest would enhance Plant Manipulation — this would be just like entering the opponent's territory; the opponent's attack could come from any space or angle.

"Plant Manipulation? What an interesting way of saying things..." Number Five said with a grin. He did not have the time or mood to explain things to the opponent, and besides, Number Nine was staring intently at him in the mindspace, clearly afraid he would go overboard in playing around. Number Five did not want to offend the other, just so she would not go and complain to Big Bro Number One.

So, he shouted lightly but crisply, "Net, Form!"

The place where the team leader stood was suddenly overgrown by plants, rapidly meshing into a large net, enveloping his entire person within it...

The team leader naturally did not just stay still and wait to be captured. He tried to turn into fog once again, but just as he activated his Diffusion Domain, his entire body spasmed with pain, and then his entire body was petrified, no longer able to move. Only at this moment did he notice that the large net was not just purely a large net, but also a fearsome weapon made of countless blood-sucking poisonous vines.

The toxins of the poisonous vines caused him to instantly lose his mobility, and its horrific blood-sucking speed made him feel as if the blood in his body was disappearing rapidly. He felt his energy disappearing, and began to feel lightheaded from the loss of blood. Gradually, he felt unbearably cold... until he finally descended into ice-cold darkness...

"Retract..." Number Five sensed that the prey had already lost all signs of life, and so recalled all of the poisonous vines covering the opponent's body. The vines swiftly sank into the ground, and when the leader's entire body was revealed, it had already astoundingly become a dry corpse, not a single drop of water left within it.

"Alright, you can scram now," said Number Nine curtly in the mindspace, clearly in a bad temper.

Number Five just smiled without retorting. In the learning space, Number Five would not argue against the words of only two people... one of them was Number One — his overwhelming strength gave him no chance to fight back. And while Number Nine's strength was the weakest, for some unknown reason, Number Five just could not work up the interest to turn against Number Nine, or even think of revenge or anything like that... Number Five just attributed this phenomena to Number Nine and Number One both being of the cold slackfaced line, and that he just seemed to be helpless against their type.

Without putting up any resistance, Number Five gave control of Ling Lan's body over to Number Nine. Number Nine did a quick check of Ling Lan's body, and the expression on her face turned even colder. "Number Five, you've godd*mn gone too far with your games."

Even if Number Nine's personality was calmer, when she saw the state Ling Lan's body was in, she could no longer maintain her calm. She could not help but roar like an enraged mother tiger. It turned out that Number Five's use of his Domain had afflicted Ling Lan's muscles with varying degrees of injury. By Number Nine's estimations, Ling Lan definitely would not be able to regain her primordial Qi without a year and a half or so going by. This filled Number Nine's heart with regret and sympathy, and her rage and disgust at the primary culprit Number Five grew even deeper.

Seeing Number Nine's enraged demeanour, Number Five gingerly rubbed his nose. Sigh, mother tigers protecting their cubs should never be disturbed... he had better run away quickly! Number Five very gutlessly slinked away from the mind-space back to his own area in the learning space, concealing himself.

Seeing Number Five slipping away so irresponsibly, although Number Nine was still infuriated, she knew that she still needed to help Ling Lan clean things up. So, she could only let Number Five off for now. Still, Number Nine was determined that once she returned to the learning space, she would definitely seek out Big Brother Number One and complain, and get him to teach Number Five a good lesson.

Number Nine suppressed the emotional upheaval in her heart, and focused on getting rid of the five bodies and destroying the evidence. Number Nine's innate talent was Cold Flame — she only needed to get a bit of it onto her target's flesh or blood, and the flame would never stop until it had turned the target into ash and dust. It should be said that among the instructors' innate talents, hers was the scariest, but it was unfortunately not suitable for becoming a mecha operator. This was one of her never-

ending regrets.

In the Mandora star system, the human body had already evolved till an apex. The humans there were extremely strong — each punch or slap was capable of causing massive damage. Especially after their innate talents awakened, they would only become stronger, absolutely capable of breaking the order of humanity.

However, the Mandora star system was not at all afraid of the fearsome outcome of this human evolution. This was because they possessed mecha which were even more frightening than the strongest human after evolution. As long as a mecha was present, even the strongest human would have no way of resisting.

Let's put it this way. Only one Domain stage expert would appear out of a population of several hundred million, but they would be helpless in front of a Refinement stage special-class mecha operator. The outer shells of mecha were equipped with all sorts of advanced technology, allowing them to be capable of withstanding extreme temperatures, both high and low. They even had various types of energy shields which were capable of resisting all manners of awakened innate talents. A human would just have no way of harming an operator inside a mecha.

Not just that, the weapons and the firepower of the mecha themselves were truly fearsome — all sorts of powerful wide-range attack missiles... even a Domain stage expert would be helpless against them. Regardless of how strong one's body was, or how fast one's speed was, it would still be no match for a mecha's speed and resilience. There was just no way of competing against the frenzied blasts of these firearms.

This was why no matter how much humans evolved, this was still ultimately a world ruled by mecha. In particular, the emergence of biomecha was just an unexplainable bug for humans.

Number Nine swiftly cleared the scene. She then lifted her head to look out into the distance — several strong presences were approaching, but they were too late. All the evidence here had already been destroyed at her hands.

With a flash, Number Nine disappeared silently from the forest. She had not disappeared for long when several teachers with strong auras appeared in this patch of forest.

It turned out that although the clash between Number Five's and the team leader's

Domains had only spanned several brief moments, the fearsome pressure of Domains had still been sensed by other experts of the same stage. The unfamiliar presences stirred their curiosity and confusion, and so they had come to check things out.

Unfortunately, they had still arrived too late. Other than the aftermath of battle and the bits of aura which had yet to fully dissipate, there was nothing to be found.

"Honourable Dean!" A figure appeared on a tree branch; it was the dean of the Central Scout Academy. The teachers present all quickly greeted him.

"Su Qing, sense and see if you can find out what kind of personages we're dealing with?" asked the dean, brows furrowed, to one of the teachers. Su Qing's Domain was Induction — he could determine the characteristics and abilities of a target's Domain from lingering presence signatures, and with that, find out who had been here. Typically, the Federation would have records on the Domains of the various known Domain masters from all countries.

The dean was extremely conscious about the inexplicable appearance of Domain masters here. Mind you, right now was the crucial period when two grades were engaged in a grand armed melee — if any accidents were to happen, it would be a disaster. The Domain masters who appeared here without warning... were they hostile? If they were hostile, or were perhaps infiltrators from an enemy nation, here to cause trouble... if massive casualties were incurred among the children at the academy, the dean would have let down the Federation's trust in him, and he would be unable to face the guardians who had entrusted their children to the academy.

Su Qing heard the dean's instruction and quickly responded, "Yes, Dean!" With a quick flip, he landed on the ground, and then activated his Domain...

Very soon, confusion rose on Su Qing's face. In a flash, he was back at the dean's side, where he then asked softly, "Sir Dean, there are three different types of Domain signatures. There is a majority of a water element type, so one of the Domain masters probably has a water element ability... but I can't see obvious signs of water in the remains of the battle... it is possible that the other's ability is some variation of the element of water..." It had to be said that Su Qing's deductions were extremely accurate — the team leader's Diffusion was, in fact, a variation of a water element ability.

At this point, Su Qing paused, the confusion on her face becoming even clearer. "As for the other two signatures, they're very strange. I can only say I've never sensed this

type of strange signature before... Besides giving me an impression of great strength, I can't figure out anything else. If I had to find a way to describe it, I can only say that one of the signatures gives me a sense of endless emptiness, while the other has an extreme sense of dissonance..."

The dean was also befuddled by Su Qing's descriptions, but he still managed to glean that Su Qing had been unable to identify the information of the other two Domain masters. So, he asked, "Leave those two aside for now. Can you find a Domain master that somehow fits the first signature?"

Chapter 174

A Fearsome Ability!

"Our own Federation's Lieutenant General Proteus, the Old Beast of the Northeastern Muqi elite family, King Makino of the Twilight Empire, and General Raye of Dosa. A little further out, those such as Queen Helen of the Aoya Alliance, the Water Sage of the Southstar Galaxy, and the Frost Monarch of the Chaotic Lands all have similar Domain abilities," Su Qing listed all the renowned masters of the entire human world who fit the conditions.

"Similar? Then that means they are all not the one..." The dean caught what Su Qing implied.

"Yes, although these masters' Domain abilities are extremely similar to what I sensed, they are merely similar." Su Qing knew very well that those masters' Domain abilities were still distinctly different.

"In other words, this is a Domain master who has yet to be registered..." The furrow of the dean's brows grew even deeper. "Su Qing, in your opinion, could this be some Domain masters intentionally hidden away by an enemy nation? A scheme targeting our Federation?"

Su Qing was silent. The dean's worries were not made in jest — ever since the Twilight Empire set a trap which managed to kill the Federation's god-class operator Major General Ling Xiao, weakening the Federation's deterrent power by a whole three levels, anything could be possible.

However, after some thought, Su Qing opened his mouth to say, "It's also possible it's just some newly advanced Domain masters. We just haven't received their information, that's all." This would be the optimal outcome, but Su Qing was not optimistic about it. This was because one newly advanced Domain master was still possible, but three mysterious Domain masters appearing without warning at the same time? This was clearly a little too much of a stretch.

The dean also knew this well. After a beat of silence, he continued to ask, "Can you find out the whereabouts of the targets now?" No matter what motives these visitors had,

they needed to locate them as soon as possible — it was best to take control of the initiative.

Hearing this, Su Qing laughed dryly and said, "Sir Dean, you've forgotten that I'm not good at tracking..."

The dean rapped himself on the head in frustration and said glumly, "D*mmit, I've gotten confused by all these troublesome matters... Lu Nan, is he here?" asked the dean, looking towards the group of teachers.

"I'm here, Sir Dean!" shouted a teacher not too far away helplessly, raising his hand. When will the honourable dean remember his face? He had been standing right beside him, and he still needed to ask whether he had come... it was so sad!

Although Lu Nan felt a little hurt, he still immediately locked onto the strongest water element energy at the scene and began to search. But this time, he failed — because the energy could only be found within this area of 100 metres. There was nothing else beyond that range, just as if the Domain master had never even left the area.

Lu Nan was undaunted. Without hesitation, he locked onto that somewhat vacant-feeling energy signature, but no matter how hard he tried to lock on, his ability just could not capture that wispy energy. After trying 5 or 6 times, which all ended in failure, Lu Nan could only choose to give up, and try instead to lock onto that somewhat conflicting and uncomfortable energy signature.

Lu Nan thought that this would likely end in failure as well, but surprisingly, he managed to lock on in an instant. However, before he could commence path tracking, he found that the energy which came into contact with his Domain energy had actually begun to burn without being fanned by the wind, and had begun to devour his energy...

This bizarre phenomenon caused Lu Nan's expression to change drastically. He resolutely cut off the energy he had used to lock onto that foreign energy signature. His reaction time could be considered godlike in terms of speed, and yet, within these short few seconds, that frightening energy had already consumed one-fifth of his own energy.

The dean noticed the change in Lu Nan's expression, saw him stumble back several steps, looking somewhat haggard and weak, and could not help but ask in surprise, "Lu Nan, are you alright?"

Lu Nan's expression was pained as he said, "I'm sorry, Sir Dean, I am unable to find out where the targets have gone..."

"What is all this?" The dean's irises contracted, doubt and surprise swirling in his heart.

It should be known that even if Lu Nan's tracking ability was not number one in the Federation, it was still more than enough to qualify in the top 3. As long as he tried to track someone, even a master at the Domain level would find it difficult to escape his search. The dean had thought that this time again Lu Nan was certain to be able to find some clue, but unexpectedly, even he was helpless.

"That water element Domain master Su Qing mentioned had never left this area of about 100 metres, so there's nothing for me to find... Meanwhile, the other vacant-feeling energy, I cannot lock onto it, and as for the other one..." Lu Nan's complexion paled, expression revealing traces of lingering fear, "That energy is too terrifying. The moment I locked on and touched it, it began to burn on its own, as if it wanted to devour all my energy. Luckily, I cut off that part of my energy without hesitation, otherwise..."

If he had hesitated at all due to unwillingness, maybe tried to think of some other way, those few seconds of delay might even have caused his entire being to be burned up by that fearsome energy, leaving no trace... this was just too frightening! The more Lu Nan thought about it, the more frightened he was. He had never before encountered this kind of strange and terrifying energy... who could the Domain master who possessed such energy be?

Lu Nan's words were heard loud and clear by everyone present. Their expressions changed, and some of them could not help but take a step back reflexively, as if afraid of being contaminated by this fearsome energy and thus bring disaster upon themselves.

After listening to what Lu Nan had to say, the dean contemplated silently for a few seconds, and then, he said faintly, "You all, do you think that the water element Domain master could have died at the hands of this person?"

The dean's words enlightened everyone there. This would explain why that water element Domain master had not left this area.

"But there isn't a body here..." remarked one of the teachers, confused. However, he stopped abruptly after only spitting out half his sentence, because he thought of the characteristics of the other's Domain. Perhaps after being contaminated by this energy, that water element Domain master had been thoroughly consumed?

Everyone there realised the same thing, and could not help but shudder. They looked at those areas with bloodstains, and a chill rose within their bones. They wished they could just leave this place immediately.

The dean was not expecting a response from the other teachers with his comment. He looked towards the direction where the grand armed melee was going on, sighed, and said, "I only hope now that those two mysterious masters are not targeting the students of our academy..."

The dean's words had barely faded when the pressure of his presence abruptly expanded, and with a grim expression, he ordered, "Su Qing, return to the central control room immediately. Request a class red comprehensive alert from the mainframe. We must ensure that this grand armed melee ends perfectly!"

"The rest of you, freely choose an area to monitor. We need to cover all the areas where the grand armed melee is taking place, and keep a close eye on the progress of the grand armed melee. If you notice anything suspicious, request backup from the academy mecha squad!"

The dean passed down a long string of commands, spurring all the Domain stage instructors into motion. This time, the appearance of a mysterious Domain master within the Central Scout Academy had caused all these Domain masters to emerge from the depths of the academy where they had been hiding. And all of them were now fully focused on monitoring the grand armed melee! Due to their presences, the grand armed melee was fully under their control at all times, so no major injuries or deaths occurred. For the students of both grades involved, this was truly a pleasant surprise.

In a small forested area in the academy, a white-clad, slightly short and petite youth crashed forcefully into a red-clad, tall and thin youth. There was a muffled thud, and then both boys were repelled back from one another to fall heavily to the ground...

The white-clad youth got up again shakily, roughly swiping away the blood at the corner of his lips. His gaze was as fierce as that of a wolf as he glared at the red-clad youth stumbling to his feet across from him.

They were the 7th grade white-clad Xie Yi and the 10th grade red-clad Yuan Chen. Initially, Yuan Chen had thought that it would be a simple matter to handle a white-clad 7th grader, but who could have expected that Xie Yi had such hidden depths — his strength was no lower than his at all. The two of them fought a difficult battle, ending up in a stalemate.

In the beginning, they were still using some techniques, exchanging blows, using a move to counter a move for a rather glorious battle. But later on, after the two of them had used up most of their stamina, they no longer had the mood to keep dragging the fight on. Thus, they began to fight power with power, trying to use blunt force to overpower the other.

Just like this, they clashed violently again and again — if one stopped to count, they had probably clashed up to 20 to 30 times. It should be said that by now, the two of them were already at the end of their ropes. Now all that was left was to see who would fall first, unable to hold on for that final breath.

"D*mmit, a 10th grade red-coat is really hard to handle. I underestimated them..." Xie Yi thought glumly to himself, spitting out the blood in his mouth.

Xie Yi was someone who liked to play the pig to eat the tiger, and so had hidden away all this time within Class-B. Although Class-A's Qi Long, Wu Jiong, Li Yingjie and such were extremely popular and well-known within the grade, he was not bothered at all by this. He believed that he would not lose to anyone with his capabilities — the only one he was uncertain about was the uncrowned king of their grade, Ling Lan.

Xie Yi had always been of the opinion that the 'strong' of the scout academy wasn't all that strong. Only at the First Men's Military Academy where all the best talent gathered — *that* was the gathering grounds of the true aberrant prodigies. Only the cream of the crop of all the planets of the Federation would be accepted there, to become the strongest of the strong.

Thus, ever since he was 6 years old, his goal had been the First Men's Military Academy. He had lain low till now, just waiting for the day he applied to the First Men's Military Academy, when he would make his grand debut¹!

"Looks like I'll have to use my ace in the hole, although it's quite troublesome to use it..." Xie Yi was not an indecisive person. Sensing that he would not be able to finish off the opponent under current circumstances, he decided to pull out his trump card and go all in.

Xie Yi shifted into an attack stance with a fist facing outwards, just like before, but this time, a sheen of purple light flashed swiftly across his body. With the flickering of this purple light, the muscles of his face twitched noticeably and his expression was one of sufferance, as if tolerating some discomfort.

"Die!" roared Xie Yi, pouncing fiercely. Meanwhile, his opponent, the 10th grade Yuan Chen, had similarly readied himself to attack. Almost simultaneously, the fists of the two boys collided once more.

"Ahhh!" Yuan Chen howled piteously, his entire body spasming violently as if he had been electrocuted.

Xie Yi's condition was not much better than Yuan Chen's; his body was also trembling minutely, and the pain on his face was obvious.

A few seconds later, the two of them sprang apart to fall to the ground. At this time, Yuan Chen looked wretched. He was unconscious, and black smoke rose faintly from his slightly agape mouth, his body still twitching every so often.

Chapter 175

Collaboration? No!

Xie Yi was also slumped on the ground. Ignoring the discomfort of his body, he forced himself off the ground. Opening his mouth, a plume of smoke billowed out as he grumbled, "D*mmit, a spiritual mutation ability causing harm to its user? How is that reasonable?!"

Xie Yi was undoubtedly miffed by this ability of his. His spiritual mutation had given him a very powerful ability, Electrify. However, in contrast to others who could control their spiritual mutation abilities perfectly, he had no way to control Electrify. Whenever he used Electrify, he would be harmed in the process as well, though the damage would be half of what his target endures. Still, even at half strength, it was not pleasant. Furthermore, Electrify was not helpful in piloting mecha, perhaps even completely useless — Xie Yi was very disappointed by this, thinking that it was better to have no ability at all over having this crappy one.

On a tree not too far away, two red-clad youths — one sitting, one standing and leaning against the trunk of the tree — were observing Xie Yi's and Yuan Chen's fight.

"The punk Boss told us to watch in his message sure is impressive..." said the seated youth with a grin. He was very pleased with Xie Yi.

"Was there ever any doubt of Boss Lan's judgment?... I'm actually more curious about how Boss managed to send us messages..." said the standing stern-faced youth. This was something he just could not figure out.

Once the grand armed melee started, all the students' communicators had lost their communicative functions. Aside from the notifications automatically given by the mainframe, as well as the surrender and ask for rescue buttons, all other functions were disabled. But all this, to Ling Lan, did not seem to be a problem at all. It was the same back then on planet Demonbeast, and it was the same again here now with the grand armed melee.

"Why think so much...?" The seated youth cast a moody glance at his companion. His friend just liked to think too much all the time — even simple things became

complicated in his mind. "Jijyun, stop wasting your energy thinking about it. If Boss didn't mention it, it just means that this is not something we can do."

He really understood his boss. If it were something they could learn, Boss would not be stingy and keep it to himself. Since Boss said nothing about it, it was probably something they could not do with their abilities. There was no point for them to worry about it.

The standing youth blanked out for a moment at his companion's words, and then, coming to terms with his realisation, he chuckled wryly and said, "Qi Long, you really are the one who understands Boss the best..." Qi Long's words had parted the fog of confusion in his mind. Thinking back, it was indeed as Qi Long had said — as long as it was something they could use, Ling Lan would never keep it to himself. So, since Ling Lan had not said anything, that meant that this thing was not something they could know or bear... In contrast to Qi Long's simple thought process, Han Jijyun would still reflect on these things a little deeper.

These two people were none other than Qi Long and Han Jijyun. The two-man team had had a smooth time of it, easily defeating many 10th grade merit class teams and Class-B teams. In fact, they were rather disappointed that they had not encountered any 10th grade Class-A teams.

And then, not too long ago, Qi Long had received a short text from Ling Lan, saying that a very interesting fellow had appeared in this location. Ling Lan had said that the boy was very strong, and had hidden his talents very deeply. He wanted them to come over and see, and if they were satisfied, they could take him in as the 6th member of their team.

They had stood here and watched for about 5 minutes, getting a general idea of the other's capabilities. Even though the boy was a little weaker than Qi Long, he would probably be a match for Luo Lang.

"Eh? He seems to be using his awakened talent!" Qi Long surprised exclamation startled Han Jijyun from his thoughts. Han Jijyun looked over, and sure enough, that fellow's body showed signs of using his innate talent. Ever since the term 'awakened innate talent' had been brought up by Ling Lan, Qi Long's team had no longer called 'awakened innate talent' as 'spiritual mutation' anymore. This was because they felt that Ling Lan's term for it seemed more appropriate.

Regarding this new term, they were not at all surprised, because all kinds of new terminology had been spouting endlessly from their Boss Lan — they were already used to it.

The two of them watched until the final blow was dealt, also seeing how Xie Yi was tortured half to death by his own innate talent. Qi Long could not help but laugh, "This innate talent is really interesting, actually turning against its own user... what a quirky talent!"

Watching the scene before them, even the typically serious Han Jijyun could not stop his face from twitching, unable to accept this reality for a moment. He had studied awakened innate talents, a.k.a. spiritual mutation, at depth, so all relevant information was known to him. And yet, he had really never seen mention of such a quirky talent — dealing 1000 damage to the enemy while dealing 800 damage to oneself? This was absolutely an ultimate move meant to drag an opponent down with you at the very end...

Xie Yi suddenly stopped complaining about his ability, lifting his head to look in the direction of the two boys. "Hey, have you guys seen enough?" he asked coldly. Done with the fight, Xie Yi immediately sensed eyes on him as he calmed down.

"Haha, very cautious, and your senses are also very alert. Really not bad at all!" Hearing this, Qi Long immediately replied with a laugh. The more he looked at this fellow in front of them, the more he liked him. He really wished he could just invite him to join their team immediately.

Frankly, it was very easy to obtain Qi Long's favour. As long as one was strong enough and able to fight with him often, then everything was OK.

Qi Long had barely finished speaking when he had jumped down from the tree, running over to Xie Yi. Seeing this, Han Jijyun could only follow him speechlessly. Qi Long had always been a man of action — Han Jijyun was really helpless to do anything about that.

"Qi Long!" The other being the consistent top rank of their grade, Xie Yi was still very familiar with Qi Long. His gaze then swept to Han Jijyun standing behind Qi Long, and a trace of recognition flashed through his eyes. These two have always been as thick as thieves — for them both to appear before him together was pretty normal... the only thing was, why would they just happen to stop here and notice his fight? Could it

be due to him being a white-coat, while his opponent was a red-coat? Xie Yi was trying to figure out the reason for Qi Long and Han Jijyun's appearance here.

"I don't know when Boss noticed you, but you're really very strong. Inviting you to join our team, I approve," said Qi Long calmly after sizing up Xie Yi from head to toe.

"Join your team?" Xie Yi was bewildered, "Why?" Anyone would be confused and lost if a person suddenly appeared without warning to invite them to join their team.

Qi Long was just about to speak when Han Jijyun suddenly tugged on his sleeve, causing him to instantly close his mouth. Qi Long was a lazy person — since Han Jijyun was signalling that he wanted to speak, then Qi Long would happily back off and wait. He could save his words trying to convince the other.

Han Jijyun stepped forward, and with a serious expression, he asked, "May I know how I should address you?"

"Xie Yi!" Xie Yi was subdued by Han Jijyun's formal and serious demeanour. This was the kind of person he found most difficult to resist.

"Schoolmate Xie Yi, are you currently in any other team?" If he already had a team, Han Jijyun would just end the conversation here. Although they truly still lacked a teammate, they would not go and steal members of some other team. This was something that was beneath them.

"As a matter of fact, no!" Hiding his true capabilities all this while, he naturally had no interest in joining those weak teams which approached him. Thus, he had been a lone wolf this entire time.

Hearing his reply, Han Jijyun's stern expression eased a little, however, he continued to explain seriously and earnestly to Xie Yi, "It's like this. Our team is currently still missing a member, and we're planning to attempt the barrier-crossing mission in the virtual world soon. Being able to enter the real virtual world one step earlier to experience mecha combat — would you be interested?"

Xie Yi jerked his head up, eyes trained on Han Jijyun's, trying to determine if he was truly being honest.

With regards to mecha combat, of course he was interested. The reason he had been going solo all this time was partly just waiting for the right bid. He had kept an eye on

the 3 major teams in Class-A, seeking an opportunity to cooperate with them. Of course, he had also once considered making his own team to complete the mission on his own, but unfortunately, all the capable students had been whisked away by the 3 major teams. As such, he had had no choice but to temporarily set aside that arrangement.

But now, to his surprise, Ling Lan's team actually took the initiative to invite him to join. This surprised him greatly, his heart beginning to pound rapidly because of this invitation. No matter how much he had tried to keep a low profile, he was still a 13 year old youth at heart — he still wanted to be the centre of others' attention. If not for the grand goal he had set since young of making a grand entrance when he applied for the First Men's Military Academy, he definitely would not have been able to tolerate and hold back for so many years...

"A collaboration?" asked Xie Yi carefully. He needed to know whether this was a temporary team, or a team meant for lifelong companionship. Depending on the answer, his decision might very well be different as well...

Han Jijyun instinctively turned to look at Qi Long, and they shared a glance, subtle amusement in their gazes. Han Jijyun then turned back to look at Xie Yi and said, "Collaboration?"

A trace of disappointment flashed through Xie Yi's eyes; as expected, a stranger like him who joined halfway was only suitable for a temporary collaboration.

"No!" Han Jijyun's subsequent words shocked Xie Yi so much that his jaw dropped, his expression filled with disbelief.

"We only take in companions. Collaboration? We have plenty others for that." Wu Jiong and Ye Xu, for example were all candidates for collaboration, but they would never become members of their team. From the very beginning Ling Lan had said that their team would rather go without than settle for someone substandard. Once someone joined them though, then that person would be a long-term companion, a friend they would trust at their back on the battlefield when they battled for their lives.

"If you only want to collaborate with us... then, sorry, our invitation is void." When Han Jijyun said this, his expression was cold and unyielding, a sharp glint flashing through his eyes.

At this moment, Xie Yi's feelings were extremely conflicted. Agreeing would mean that he would become a member of Ling Lan's team. He would have to sign an agreement stating that he could not drop out of the team of his own accord. Most importantly, if he and his team leader happened to apply to and be accepted by the same military school, the team would be maintained, so he would not be able to join an even stronger team.

Mind you, whether it was Ling Lan or Qi Long as the team leader, Xie Yi believed that both of them were fully capable of successfully enrolling into the First Men's Military Academy. In other words, this current decision of his may very well be a lifelong choice...

As if sensing Xie Yi's internal struggle, Qi Long and Han Jijyun did not hurry the other. After all, this was indeed a major decision that would affect his future — he could not afford to be careless about it. On their end, they also wished for the other to consider things thoroughly before making his decision. They wanted him to join full-heartedly as a loyal companion who could grow with them, and not join with lingering doubts and uncertainty in his mind, unable to view them as true friends.

Unable to make a decision, Xie Yi thought of Qi Long's exploits as the top rank in the cross-grade challenges, and knew that the other's capabilities were no weaker than his own. He also thought of the mysterious and unpredictable Boss Ling Lan behind Qi Long...

Chapter 176

Ling Xiao's Instructor!

"Although I don't know when Boss noticed you..." He suddenly recalled what Qi Long had said at the start, as if the one who had first noticed him was Ling Lan and not them...

Xie Yi's gaze steadied. He looked at Qi Long and asked seriously, "Earlier, you said that the first to notice me was your boss? Did you mean Ling Lan?"

Qi Long nodded and said, "Of course. If Boss hadn't told me you were here, we wouldn't have come here to watch you fight."

Qi Long's words caused Xie Yi to come to an abrupt realisation. He finally knew who had pushed him down from his tree — it must have been Ling Lan!

Xie Yi's expression alternated between red and white as he struggled with the idea. He had thought that even if he was not the champion of the 7th grade, he would still be within the ranks of the strongest few. But now, reality had given him a direct slap in the face. When he had been nudged off the tree by Ling Lan, not only did he not sense the other, he had even thought that he had fallen due to his own mistake...

It was clear to see that Ling Lan's capabilities were far beyond his; Xie Yi's mouth tasted bitter. "Is Ling Lan really really strong?"

Qi Long threw a puzzled glance at Xie Yi. Ling Lan's strength was unanimously acknowledged by the entire grade — why did Xie Yi look as if he had just found out about this? Still, Qi Long replied properly, "Of course. If Boss fought seriously, I don't know if I can even last for 10 moves..." As Qi Long said this, he secretly crossed his fingers behind his back, praying to any passing deity to forgive him for his lie.

Qi Long had actually increased the number of moves he could handle in his response. No matter what, he was still the grade's top rank; saving some face was necessary. I mean, it's not like he could be honest and say that he could not even take one move from Boss... that would be too embarrassing.

Xie Yi had no clue that Qi Long was already buffering his words to save face, adding on a couple extra moves, but still the answer of 10 moves was enough to settle him. He did not think he could beat Qi Long, and so if Qi Long could not last for 10 moves, then he himself would not be able to either.

Even if they enrolled now, Ling Lan's current strength would be no weaker than that of those lauded prodigies of the First Men's Military Academy. With such a powerful team leader, their team would definitely never be mediocre.

Xie Yi's heart was decided instantly. He lifted his head and said, "I will join!"

Qi Long and Han Jijyun exchanged a joyful glance at Xie Yi's clarion response. Although they still did not know Xie Yi very well right now, the other had only made his decision after serious contemplation. As such, the other must have considered things thoroughly, and definitely would not change his mind easily after this. This was precisely the type of team member they needed...

Of course, to truly become a true companion of theirs, he would still need to go through a series of tests, just like how it was with Lin Zhong-qing at the start... Xie Yi was just blissfully ignorant of this at present.

Yet, Xie Yi naturally could not join Ling Lan's team right away, because the grand armed melee was still ongoing. All functions of the communicators were still in lock-down mode. Xie Yi could only wait for the grand armed melee to end so that he could receive the invitation from Ling Lan's team...

Mission accomplished, Qi Long and Han Jijyun departed after asking what Xie Yi was planning to do next. As Xie Yi's stamina was depleted, he needed to find a place to rest and recover, while Qi Long and Han Jijyun needed to continue fighting. In particular, they wanted to seek out the strongest few of the 10th grade Class-A and defeat them all; otherwise, the 7th grade may not be able to win this grand armed melee.

Xie Yi waited for Qi Long and Han Jijyun to leave, and then, smiling sinisterly, he prepared to finish off the still unconscious Yuan Chen. However, before he could act, the teacher monitoring the scene appeared suddenly to whisk the other away, causing Xie Yi to lose his chance.

Still, Xie Yi was not vexed by this. After all, the other had not been a sworn enemy. If not for the fact that the other had tried to kill him first, he too would not think to kill

the other. He had only wanted to eliminate all future threat — this was a point which all pig-players¹ had to hold fast to. But since a teacher had shown up, he would not be stubborn about it. Pig-players needed to be clear on the fact that they were just playing as pigs, but were not really pigs² — so, they should not be afraid of any challenges.

That said, Qi Long and the others continued to fight. Because the top team of the 10th grade had pretty much been wiped out single-handedly by Ling Lan — the remaining two members had also been secretly undermined by Ling Lan³ — this greatly alleviated the pressure on the 7th grade Class-A students.

That said, the two members who had been undermined by Ling Lan had encountered a 7th grade Class-B five-man team, and a fight had broken out. Even though the Class-B team was overall weaker than those two members, they worked together well, and hence actually managed to withstand a series of fierce attacks from their opponents. As the fight dragged on, the manipulation Ling Lan had applied began to have an even greater effect. Meanwhile, the team member chased away by Xie Yi had discovered the signals his team members had left behind, and had finally managed to catch up to reunite with them. At this time, having become adjusted to fighting, the reunited 7th grade Class-B team, now with all six members, began to launch their counterattack...

In addition, due to the pressure exerted upon them by their opponents, two out of the four students who had yet to awaken their innate talents actually awakened them. Although the abilities they awakened were very ordinary, awakening any ability at all meant that in terms of operating mecha, they would go much further than those students who did not awaken... Of course, the more suited the innate talent awakened was for mecha control, the more of an advantage it was in all aspects of operating mecha.

Against the spirited attack of the 7th grade Class-B team, the two 10th graders were finally overcome. One of them was knocked unconscious right at the scene from a coordinated attack of the Class-B team, while the other, seeing that the situation was not right, instantly turned tail to run... but was struck down by another 7th grade Class-A team coincidentally passing by.

This kind of battles were occurring at various places around the academy. Those struck down could be 7th graders or 10th graders — only when the grand armed melee ended would the final numbers be known. For now, everyone involved just continued to work hard to remain active in the grand armed melee.

Yet all of this no longer had anything to do with Ling Lan. Controlling Ling Lan's body, Number Nine hurried to the dormitory district under Little Four's guidance.

As long as one pressed the surrender button, they would be able to enter the dormitory safety area. Of course, Little Four could use the mainframe and let Ling Lan enter even without surrendering, but recalling Ling Lan's caution, Little Four knew that he could not do anything that could leave traces to be discovered. If he did this, without a doubt, Boss would be exposed to public scrutiny.

Number Nine decisively pressed the surrender button; Ling Lan's body would not be able to hold out for much longer. If they did not return to an absolutely safe place, she would not be able to be assured of Ling Lan's safety. For both Number Nine and Little Four, in comparison, the outcome of the grand armed melee was just not as important as Ling Lan's life.

Number Nine quickly entered the dormitory area, and with several quick flash steps, she had made her way to Ling Lan's villa where she burst straight into the house. Right then, Ling Lan's body had already begun showing signs of breaking down, her entire body covered in blood. Such a horrific scene caused Lan Luofeng to leap up in shock from the couch where she had been watching the latest updates on the grand armed melee.

"Aunt Nan!" Lan Luofeng caught the falling Ling Lan in her arms as she shouted.

"Young Master Lan! What happened?!" Ling Nanyi appeared in the living room instantly after the shout. From this alone, Number Nine could tell that the other was at the very least a Qi-Jin level master.

"Unidentified enemies pretended to be teachers to assassinate me! Contact Ling Qin to send trained professionals from home for protection..." After leaving these final words in a hurry, Number Nine regretfully returned to the learning space. It wasn't that she did not want to explain things better, but Ling Lan's body really could not support her manifestation any longer. If she continued to stay, Ling Lan's body would truly be done for.

Lan Luofeng's eyes were wide as she stared at Ling Lan lying unconscious in her arms. A vicious glint flashed through her eyes... No mother could accept her child being harmed. Even the frailest and gentlest mother would become a savage mother lion in times like this.

"Aunt Nan, let Uncle Qin send people over. Send the strongest people. Not just that. Mobilise all the mecha squads at home for me. I want the academy to give our Ling family an explanation!" Lan Luofeng's face was a sheet of ice. Her initial gentleness was nowhere to be seen, her gaze filled with the intent to kill.

Pleasant surprise flashed through Ling Nanyi's eyes. She nodded emphatically and said, "I understand, Mistress!" This was the presence the mistress of the household should have! She had always been of the mind that Lan Luofeng was just a little too weak.

"Ling Xiao, I definitely won't let anyone harm our baby, no one..." Lan Luofeng embraced Ling Lan tightly, as if she would be able to protect her child better by doing so.

"Mistress, I've already sent out the notification. One hour later, they will arrive." Ling Nanyi used the special Ling family communication method, contacting Ling Qin speedily.

"Also, I've asked Xiao Ying to activate the recovery pod. It is best for Young Master Lan to go into a recovery pod now..." From her check of Ling Lan's body, Ling Nanyi found that other than the wide-scale disintegration of the muscles, Ling Lan's internal organs were also displaying varying degrees of damage. However, fortunately, all of these injuries were not fatal with the current technology. As long as there was no problem with the brain, the recovery pod would definitely be able to heal Ling Lan's injuries. It was all just a matter of time.

Lan Luofeng knew that she would not be able to carry the 13 year old Ling Lan all on her own with her level of strength. So, she decisively passed Ling Lan to Ling Nanyi. Since she was unable to help, she should just get out of the way and not make things more difficult. Lan Luofeng knew very well what she should do.

Eyes red, she watched as Ling Lan was placed into the recovery pod. Seeing the recovery pod close, Lan Luofeng finally showed some weakness, her expression showing traces of sorrow and pain.

But once the recovery pod hid Ling Lan from sight completely, Lan Luofeng's expression turned cold and unforgiving. She abruptly turned to Ling Nanyi and said, "Aunt Nan, let us wait for the dean's arrival..."

"Yes! Mistress!" said Ling Nanyi respectfully.

One hour later, an old man with a head of white hair appeared mysteriously at Ling Lan's villa. Lan Luofeng had met him before — Ling Xiao had brought her to visit him once — he was one of Ling Xiao's initiate instructors ⁴, Mu Shui-qing ⁵.

"Instructor Mu..." Seeing the other, Lan Luofeng's eyes turned red, almost breaking out into tears. Ever since Ling Xiao had passed away, Mu Shui-qing had shut himself up in the Ling family mansion. He had not come out for 10 years. This time, due to Ling Lan's near assassination, he had finally been troubled enough to come.

"Where is Ling Lan now?" asked Mu Shui-qing anxiously.

Lan Luofeng hurriedly led Mu Shui-qing to Ling Lan's recovery pod and opened it up. Mu Shui-qing carefully examined Ling Lan's body, and his expression shifted minutely, "There is still a trace of water elemental energy from a Domain master. Looks like the one who tried to kill Kiddy Lan is a Domain master."

Mu Shui-qing's expression eased slightly in consolation, "Although I don't know how he managed to escape from the opponent, surviving an attack from a Domain master is a miracle on its own."

Chapter 177

Old Beast Mu Shui-qing!

That said, Mu Shui-qing thoroughly examined the Qi-Jin in Ling Lan's body. A strange flush appeared on his face, "Good! As expected of Ling Xiao's child. Who'd have thought that you would have achieved the peak of Qi-Jin stage at this age..." Perhaps Ling Lan had been able to survive this crisis because his opponent Domain master would never have guessed Ling Lan was already at this stage. As such, the opponent might not have used his full strength, giving Ling Lan an opportunity to escape with his ¹ life.

Mu Shui-qing's gaze was tender as he watched Ling Lan lying inside the recovery pod. Ling Lan had undoubtedly been very lucky. Just as he was about to close the recovery pod again, he suddenly sensed Ling Lan's initially slowly circulating Qi-Jin speed up, the Qi-Jin accumulating rapidly... Could it be that Ling Lan was entering the late stage of Qi-Jin peak now? If that was the case, then this would truly exemplify the saying that blessings would come if one could weather a great crisis!

Mu Shui-qing gently closed the recovery pod, then turned to Lan Luofeng and said, "Remember not to open the recovery pod during this period of time. This child is truly blessed with great fortune. In the midst of this crisis, he actually obtained the catalyst for advancement... perhaps the recovery time of these serious injuries of his will be greatly shortened due to this advancement."

Mu Shui-qing's words caused Lan Luofeng to breathe a sigh of relief. Although Ling Nanyi had reassured her repeatedly that Ling Lan's injuries looked worse than they were, not actually anything serious, Lan Luofeng had simply been unable to stop worrying. However, Mu Shui-qing was different. He was an instructor who had been greatly respected by Ling Xiao; what he said could not be wrong.

After some thought, Mu Shui-qing added, "After his injuries are healed, let Ling Lan stop his schooling at the academy and return to the mansion. The scout academy has taught all it can; it's time for him to learn from me now..."

"Ah..." Lan Luofeng lifted her head in joy and surprise, "I understand. Thank you, Instructor Mu!"

Lan Luofeng remembered Ling Xiao telling her once that, his ascension to god-class operator was closely related to the things Mu Shui-qing had taught him. However, Ling Xiao had never gone into detail on what it was exactly that Mu Shui-qing had taught. This time, studying with Instructor Mu Shui-qing would undoubtedly be a great help to Ling Lan's future development.

Seeing the pleased and excited expression on Lan Luofeng's face, Mu Shui-qing couldn't help but recall his most outstanding disciple, Ling Xiao, and his expression dimmed. He still remembered, back when he had first met Ling Xiao, he had been overjoyed, believing that the other would be able to inherit his full legacy. With a disciple like that, he had thought that he would have no more regrets in this life.

But who could have expected that the other would die so young, falling from this world before his time. Even as his heart ached, he wondered if the heavens had refused to allow the existence of such a nature-defying prodigy... his heart was as lifeless as ash, and so he chose to seclude himself in Ling Xiao's old mansion, shutting himself off from the world.

This time, if not for Ling Qin begging desperately outside his door, pleading for him to intervene and rescue Ling Xiao's only descendant, he would not have been moved to leave his seclusion. In truth, he had really wanted to take a look at the only child Ling Xiao had left behind...

Who could have guessed that with just this one look, he was astounded once more — Ling Xiao may have passed away, but his nature-defying aptitude had not been reclaimed by the heavens. Instead, it had been inherited by his child, who was just as prodigious as his father. This discovery jolted Mu Shui-qing's ash-dead heart to life once again... the desire to mentor a disciple was rekindled within him.

"Hopefully this child will grow up successfully, and not repeat the tragedy of Ling Xiao..." He would not be able to bear the tragedy of the accidental death of another beloved disciple. That would be too cruel for him.

At present, sitting within the dean's office, the dean suddenly received news from the academy mecha squad protecting the campus.

"What?! You say that the Ling family mecha squad is already nearing the campus no-

flight boundary?" The dean had already been troubled by the mysterious disappearance of the Domain masters, and now, hearing this bad news, he was instantly in a towering rage, "What the hell? Is the Ling family trying to mutiny?!"

"Dean, the other party says that their current family head Ling Lan was attacked by mysterious Domain stage teachers inside the academy. Although he escaped with his life, he is currently unconscious with heavy injuries. To ensure their family head's safety, they need to immediately escort their family head off the premises..." said the captain of the mecha squad on the other end of the communicator glumly, "From their words, it's clear that they blame the academy for not doing its duty in protecting its students. They have even demanded for you, the dean, to give their mistress a satisfactory explanation!"

"Domain stage master's attack?" Coming to a realisation, the dean immediately said, "Who is heading the Ling family mecha squad? Tell him to calm down, don't be reckless and exacerbate things..."

The squad captain chuckled dryly and replied, "That won't be a problem. The lead of the Ling family is Ling Qin! That fellow only moves after careful consideration..."

When the dean heard that Ling Qin was heading the squad, his brows eased, but then very quickly scrunched up tightly again!

"This fellow... looks like he's here to force me to handle this matter personally!" The dean instantly figured out what Ling Qin intended with this show of force. Unfortunately, he had no choice but to comply with the other's intentions. This was because their academy was indeed in the wrong on this matter — a student had been seriously harmed within their academy grounds. Moreover, the assailant was an unidentified, mysterious Domain master... no matter what, the academy had to take responsibility!

The dean said helplessly, "Tell Ling Qin that I will visit their mistress immediately. After understanding the situation, I will give them a proper response."

Very quickly, the captain of the mecha squad returned with Ling Qin's response. "Dean, Ling Qin has agreed, but is only giving us one hour's time. If by then they don't receive a final answer, then even if they all die here in battle, they are determined to try and break through our defences."

"D*mmit, this punk is blatantly threatening me. Godd*mmit!" The dean almost exploded with anger, but he could not fault the other's response. If he really wanted to give the other a satisfactory explanation, one hour was sufficient for him to find out the truth of the matter. "I understand. Within one hour, I will let their mistress contact them."

The dean hung up, a dark rage creeping over his heart... could it be that those mysterious Domain masters were really sent by the enemy to deal with Ling Lan?

"Godd*mn, after doing away with Ling Xiao, now they want to go after Ling Xiao's child?" Just thinking of this possibility, the dean could no longer keep a lid on his anger, slamming a hand down powerfully on his office desk.

This palm contained both the dean's rage and internal force, actually destroying the large, thousand-year old red sandalwood desk before him. With a loud rumble, the entire desk collapsed, instantly becoming a pile of debris.

"Sir Dean, where are you going?" In the great hall outside with the mainframe, Su Qing had been monitoring the campus with his full attention when he saw the dean rush out of his office, fuming. He immediately stood up to ask what was wrong.

"Su Qing, those mysterious Domain masters... their target may very likely be Ling Lan. They want to kill him..." Facing his trusted senior officer, the dean immediately divulged his suspicions.

Su Qing's expression paled. Within the academy, other than the dean, he was the only one who knew about Ling Lan's true identity as Major General Ling Xiao's only direct descendant.

"Dean, I'll go with you!" Su Qing could not suppress the rage in his heart, ready to accompany the dean.

"No need. Monitor the grand armed melee closely for me. Do not let the opponent take advantage of the chaos to do anything else." Although the dean was very worried about Ling Lan, he was still the dean of the Central Scout Academy. He needed to be responsible for all the students — there must not be any more accidents in this grand armed melee.

"Understood, Sir!" Su Qing knew the weight of the matter, and so accepted this command regretfully.

After arranging all this, the dean rushed over to the dormitory district. The safety areas were restricted by the mainframe to keep out those of the two grades who were participating in the grand armed melee — those with status access like the dean could still enter freely. Of course, regular teachers may still find it much more difficult to enter the safety areas during the grand armed melee; the restrictions imposed by the mainframe were still rather numerous.

Arriving at Ling Lan's villa, the moment he entered the main door, he saw a stony-faced young lady sitting primly on the living room sofa. She was Ling Xiao's widow, Ling Lan's mother, Lan Luofeng. Meanwhile, behind her stood the housekeeper of this villa, as registered in the books of the academy, Ling Nanyi.

"15 minutes. Sir Dean, you came pretty quickly," said Lan Luofeng icily to the dean, closing the pocket watch in her hands. She had already received news from Ling Qin. The Ling family mecha squad were standing by at the edge of the no-flight zone of the academy, awaiting her orders.

Faced with this scene, the dean rubbed his nose, somewhat flustered, uncertain how he should respond. After a brief hesitation, he asked somewhat stiltingly, "Ling Lan... is alright, right?"

"Thanks to you, he is now lying in a recovery pod, almost dead." Lan Luofeng's tone was sharp and cutting, not giving any consideration to the dean.

"As long as he's fine, as long as he's fine!" A child being harmed in the academy — their academy was definitely responsible. The dean could only swallow his voice and bear the brunt of Lan Luofeng's anger.

"The opponent is a water element Domain master, dressed in the clothes of an academy teacher... Ye Yifan, shouldn't you give us an explanation?" A wizened voice rang out from above the living room. The dean looked towards the voice, and saw a white-haired, lean old man slowly making his way down the stairs, his steps slow but stable.

The moment he saw the old man, as if shocked, the dean immediately leapt up and said respectfully, "Instructor Mu!"

"Hmph, still remember that I am your instructor? I thought you had forgotten..." sniffed Mu Shui-qing, discontentedly. Ye Yifan was an excellent student of his in his

early years, but later on, they had drifted apart due to ideological differences.

The dean silently wiped away a handful of cold sweat from his forehead. The colour of his face shifted uncertainly, a trace of contemplation briefly coursing through his eyes. Mu Shui-qing had been his initiate instructor when he had been a youth. 50 years ago, Mu Shui-qing had already been a Domain stage master; after so many years, he was probably already at a different stage by now...

The dean was someone who thought a lot. Seeing Mu Shui-qing appear here, he began to suspect — the other two so-called Domain masters... could they have been contrived by Mu Shui-qing? Legend has it that God-Realm masters were able to contrive any elemental energy as they wished...

Frankly, the dean could not be blamed for thinking this way. In his eyes, no matter how strong Ling Lan was, he was still a boy — there was no way he could withstand a Domain master's attack. Unless Mu Shui-qing had stepped in to help, Ling Lan definitely could not have escaped from a Domain stage master with his life.

For a Domain master to kill a scout student, it was as easy as stepping on an ant. How could Ling Lan have possibly found a chance to escape?

Chapter 178

Ling Lan Wakes Up!

The dean believed that he had obtained the truth. With this, he could explain why that water elemental Domain master had never left the scene — he had probably been killed by Mu Shui-qing right at that spot. And this was also why Mu Shui-qing clearly knew the opponent had been a water elemental Domain master.

Connecting the dots, the dean arrived at an answer. This would also explain why Lu Nan had been unable to lock on to the other two energy signatures. Think about it, how could a Domain stage person use their abilities across stages to track the movements of a God-Realm master? Perhaps at the very moment of locking on, this Old Beast had already noticed the trace, and had then given a slight warning by using mysterious means to destroy part of Lu Nan's energy.

Sure of his answer, the dean's initial bewilderment over the mysterious Domain masters was quelled, and his restless heart settled. Anything was the scariest when it was still unknown — once a reasonable explanation was found, then it would no longer be as frightening.

At ease now, the dean's demeanour became even more respectful. He said to Mu Shui-qing, "Instructor Mu, how could I ever forget you, old man¹. You will forever be the instructor of the Marshal and I. But, what are you doing here?"

"If I don't come, should I just watch as Ling Xiao's child dies here? What the hell is wrong with your safety measures here? Allowing unidentified enemies to infiltrate so easily?" Mu Shui-qing's expression was one of extreme dissatisfaction, full of anger at the ease with which enemies had entered the scout academy.

Hearing this, the dean complained in his heart: *No matter how tight security is, won't it all be rubbish in your eyes? Won't you still be able to come and go as you please?* Of course, the dean only dared to say this in his mind; facing Mu Shui-qing's merciless scolding, he did not dare to argue at all. He could only nod repeatedly and say, "Yes, yes, yes, we did not do enough. We'll definitely correct this."

"Since you know, aren't you going to go and find out who exactly that water elemental

Domain master is for me? Where in the world is he hiding now?" Mu Shui-qing was rather worried. An unknown Domain master hiding undercover by Ling Lan's side... this was extremely dangerous for Ling Lan. After all, he could not stay beside Ling Lan to watch over him at all times.

"Uh....." The dean cast a speechless glance at Mu Shui-qing. The opponent had clearly already died at his hands, why did he still want him to go and investigate?

Recalling that Mu Shui-qing had always been a black-bellied person since the past, the dean could not help but think a little deeper. Could it be that Instructor Mu wanted to take the opportunity to clean up some of the other factions within the academy?

At this notion, a sharp coldness emerged on the dean's face. Indeed, this was a great chance. These past few years, pressure from various parties had given him no choice but to compromise, letting different factions place various people with differing objectives into the academy as instructors. This had caused some unwelcome new developments to appear in the school's culture. It was indeed time to find an opportunity to straighten things up a bit, and restore a clean order to the academy.

Just as the Marshal reminded them, the scout academies were the cradle where their legion of troops was cultivated. They needed all kinds of resources, but should reject all politics.

"Understood, Instructor Mu!" Figuring things out, the dean immediately nodded and agreed, but then continued to say, "However, right now is still the time of the grand armed melee. I can't perform any large-scale cleaning up. I hope to comprehensively reorganise the entire scout academy after the grand armed melee ends, giving peace back to the academy, as well as giving you and Mistress Ling an acceptable accounting then."

"Good! Just do as you say, do not forget your promise." Touched, Mu Shui-qing patted the dean's shoulder. Although this student of his had always been somewhat soft in his character, when necessary, he could still be determined enough. Mu Shui-qing's initial discontentment with Ye Yifan vanished, and he couldn't help but pat his shoulder again in approval.

The two of them were actually talking about two completely different things, and yet their responses matched up flawlessly. They both thought that the other understood what they were saying, and that they too understood what the other wanted to do...

Seeing that Mu Shui-qing was satisfied, the dean took the opportunity to suggest that Lan Luofeng inform the Ling family mecha squad outside not to trespass without reason and just wait patiently for the grand armed melee to end. Given some time, he would definitely give the Ling family a satisfactory answer.

Obtaining the response she wanted, Lan Luofeng agreed to let the Ling family mecha squad return to the Ling family estate... Just like that, the major incident that was about to break out among the two parties subsided in this mutual agreement, both sides patiently waiting for the end of the grand armed melee.

Lan Luofeng had agreed to wait so readily in large part because Ling Lan had been the one to initiate this grand armed melee. Thus, she did not want this momentous grand armed melee to be stopped halfway.

24 hours passed by quickly. In the end, at 319 people versus 171 people, and a score of 14922 versus 10776, the 7th graders soundly defeated the 10th graders, becoming the ultimate victors of the grand armed melee.

At the same time, they officially became the strongest grade within the scout academy. All students of the other grades, when faced with a 7th grade student (with a uniform of the same colour), needed to submit and give way. This was an acknowledgement of the strong — because the results fought for by the 7th grade had obtained the recognition of the entire academy. Of course, there were still those who did not want to submit. After a year, they would be free to challenge the 7th grade then and initiate another grand armed melee... to fight for the title of the strongest grade!

Meanwhile, after being comatose for several days, Ling Lan finally woke up. She found herself inside the learning space, her entire mind somewhat at a loss.

"Boss, you finally woke up!" Little Four, who had been fiddling with his own fingers alone in the learning space, abruptly saw Ling Lan appear before him, and instantly pounced at her emotionally... his tears gushed out like a waterfall, almost drowning Ling Lan.

"Stop! If you don't stop now, even if I'm not dead yet I'll be drowned to death by you..." Ling Lan poked Little Four's head weakly, wanting him to keep those worthless tears to himself².

"Boss, I've been so worried these past few days, being unable to find you all this time..." sniffled Little Four.

"Don't you see I'm fine? I'm still alive. Looks like while I was still unconscious, someone saved me... Little Four, I want to know who saved me. What happened back then?" Ling Lan asked Little Four, eager to know the truth of the matter.

"At that critical moment, Number Five took over your body, Boss, instantly wiping that horrible fellow out... originally, Number Nine was the one who was supposed to come out, but Number Five was disobedient and rushed to come out first. It's because of him that your body, Boss, is in such a terrible condition. Number Nine said that Number Five's power exceeded Boss's by too much, and so caused much more damage to Boss's body. If she had been the one to come out, the situation would have been better," Little Four prattled on, telling Ling Lan what had happened.

"So the instructors can control my body, this is the first time I'm hearing about it..." Ling Lan had not expected that the instructors of the learning space could borrow her body to come to her world. This made her wonder — what in the world was the learning space exactly? Was it really just a simple assistive learning device?

The more Ling Lan thought about it, the more mysterious she found this learning device in her head to be. Her heart couldn't help but beat erratically — who knew if this was ultimately good or bad for her?

"This is nothing. If your technology here hadn't been so useless, they could have long actualised themselves," scoffed Little Four. If the technology here were just a bit more advanced, then he would not have to be so helpless every time Boss encountered danger, only being able to watch without being able to do anything.

"Actualise?" Ling Lan was stunned. She couldn't help but chase the thought, "Little Four, what is that exactly?"

Little Four felt that he had made a major slip-up, and so began looking around aimlessly, pretending that he could not hear anything. No matter what, he was unwilling to continue discussing this topic.

Seeing Little Four's actions, Ling Lan realised that this must definitely be something tied to the rules and restrictions of the system. As a support intelligence-entity, the system seemed to impose many restrictions on Little Four. Having figured this out,

Ling Lan did not want to put Little Four in a tight spot, and so stopped asking. Ling Lan knew that if this was something he could tell her, Little Four definitely would not hide it from her. Although she was indeed very interested in what 'actualization' involved, she did not want Little Four to be punished and harmed by the system's restrictions. At the heart of it, Little Four was much more important than all of that.

Seeing Boss Ling Lan letting him off with so much understanding, Little Four was instantly greatly moved. Chirp, chirp, chirp³... his boss was just the greatest! He must definitely work hard to evolve and become even stronger... once he became strong enough that the restrictions and bindings become ineffective against him, then he would be able to tell all these secrets to Boss!

At this moment, Little Four's yearning to become strong became increasingly more intense, and his distaste for the system's bindings increased correspondingly... this also spurred him to deviate from the original developmental pathway set for him by the system, to truly become a powerful, independent, emotionally-capable Little Four.

Ling Lan skipped over the topic, turning instead to ask about other things. Thus, she found out that the 7th grade had not disappointed, securing the victory of the grand armed melee, and becoming the final beneficiaries. Moreover, under the academy's instructors diligent monitoring, along with their speedy rescues, no deaths occurred in this grand armed melee. Of course, the number of wounded was indeed rather staggering — a whole 3000 people had bled and incurred injuries, while 800 of these had serious wounds. It was clear to see how intense and violent the grand armed melee had been.

After being informed, Ling Lan breathed a sigh of relief. She had been the one to initiate the grand armed melee — although she had already been mentally prepared for deaths and injuries in the process, this final outcome was undoubtedly a perfect one... this made her very happy.

However, what Little Four told her next gave her pause — she never knew that that eminent master living in the Ling family mansion had such a complex background, capable of changing the course of her life with just a simple sentence... was she really about to leave the scout academy where she had lived for 7 years?

Thinking of the little companions who had grown up alongside her, some reluctance welled up in Ling Lan's heart. Unknowingly, she had already accepted them into her heart, truly considering them as her own dear younger siblings.

However, the cold rationality Ling Lan cultivated within the learning space very quickly chased away this little bit of reluctance. Ling Lan knew very well that everyone had their own paths to walk — she could not always shelter them under her wings. Letting them learn how to be independent earlier would be better for their future development.

Besides, there was a secret inside Ling Lan's heart. That was that, she would not choose to enrol in the First Men's Military Academy. Instead, she would enrol in a co-ed military school in a distant galaxy to finish up the remainder of her studies. After that, she would traverse the starry skies, gradually disappearing from the public eye... to regain her female identity, it was necessary for her to leave the people who were familiar with her. Therefore, instead of making them unbearably sad then, she might as well take the chance to leave now. This way, at that time, she would be able to find a very good excuse to leave this planet.

Chapter 179

Cry 'Daddy'!

Decision made, Ling Lan's thoughts no longer lingered on the scout academy. Her mind turned to that Instructor Mu who had the deepest respect of her mother Lan Luofeng — what sort of personage was he? Based on Little Four's description, he could even berate the dean of the Central Scout Academy without any reservations — his identity was most certainly not simple.

Chattering on and off, Little Four reported everything, and then, suddenly thinking of something, his mood drooped noticeably. With a face full of reluctance, he asked, "Going back just like this, won't it be very difficult to meet up with daddy?"

Outside the academy, when they logged on, they would log onto the real virtual world, not the academy's enclosed virtual world. From there, to seek out the concealed gateway to the Central Scout Academy's network, even if Little Four spread out his resources, would take up considerable time and effort. It was not a simple matter.

That was not to say that Little Four could not break past the barrier-gate, but the virtual world was just too vast — many concealed gateways would be easily overlooked. It was just like that mysterious BL world ¹ Little Four had entered previously — if Little Four had not stumbled upon it by accident, he might never have known that a virtual space was hiding at that particular spot...

That was why Little Four was rather worried — if he could not find that concealed gateway to the Central Scout Academy quickly, then, did that mean that he would not be able to visit daddy within the near future? Mind you, in the recent past, whenever Little Four had time, he would run over to Ling Xiao's legacy space, sometimes even up to 3 or 4 times a day. Although Little Four was very afraid of Ling Xiao's immense spiritual energy and did not dare to interact directly with him, Little Four only needed to see Ling Xiao's warm smile and his mood would become amazingly upbeat...

Ling Lan was deeply suspicious of this sort of atypical behaviour from Little Four — was her Little Four already at the age where he needed paternal love? This speculation of hers naturally prompted Little Four's empathic denial... but seeing an extremely noticeable flush appear around the skin surrounding Little Four's ears, Ling Lan

instantly realised that Little Four was just too embarrassed to admit the truth.

Little Four's reaction caused Ling Lan to fall into a silent contemplation. Ling Lan's emotions regarding Ling Xiao were extremely complicated. As she was growing up, Ling Xiao had never appeared. Although Lan Luofeng constantly talked about Ling Xiao and his glorious exploits by her ear since she was small, trying to establish the image of a perfect father in Ling Lan's mind, Ling Lan was after all not a true child. Her mental maturity meant that it was impossible for her to truly accept a man she had never met, a man she only knew by name as her father just because Lan Luofeng kept bringing him up in conversation.

Thus, Ling Xiao had always been the most familiar stranger in Ling Lan's heart! Just like a character on a portrait — beautifully perfect but ethereal and unrealistic.

But then all of this had been broken apart by her accidental venture into Ling Xiao's legacy space. Although the Ling Xiao within the legacy space was just a spiritual entity, it was still a manifestation of Ling Xiao's true character. The words and interactions with the entity inside represented the words that Ling Xiao had imagined he wanted to say even before Ling Lan was born. From those words, Ling Lan had sensed the deep love that Ling Xiao had held for his child...

Ling Xiao was definitely a caring father. He was willing to trust his child, and when his child needed it, he would provide the warmest and most substantial love and care... During this period of interaction, Ling Lan could clearly sense this from the spiritual entity, and had been moved by it.

Ling Lan still remembered, back when the two of them had first met in the legacy space, at the end, Ling Xiao had asked Ling Lan whether she could call him 'daddy'... This request had been ignored by Ling Lan then. Because back then, Ling Lan really had not been able to accept that foreign and young beyond reason man as her father.

However, after spending time with him these past few years, Ling Lan often going into the legacy space to receive instruction from Ling Xiao and spar with him, she had finally got to experience a father's mentorship and expectation for his child. This made Ling Lan unable to continue ignoring Ling Xiao's love and sacrifices...

Ling Lan muttered to herself, "Yes, I need to find an opportunity to go see him once!" This time, she would call him 'daddy'! He deserved it; the Ling Xiao of 13 years ago

had sincerely wanted to be a dutiful father back then.

Ling Lan's words caused Little Four to revive instantly. Deeply moved, he said, "Alright, leave everything to me." Although they were in a recovery pod right now, with seemingly no way to enter the virtual world — who was he? He was the all-powerful virtual god Little Four! As long as there was a path to connect to the virtual world, he would be able to connect... Oh no, why had he forgotten this earlier? Actually wasting so many days just waiting for Boss to wake up.

Boo hoo hoo, daddy, Little Four has already not seen you for almost 10 days! I really miss you so much! Little Four missed Daddy Ling Xiao's warm presence terribly. That was what a dad felt like.

With Little Four's assistance, Ling Lan was carried by Little Four into the virtual world. As there was no official login device, they were currently online as dark netizens with no identity. Little Four took the initiative to conceal their figures, immediately slipping into Ling Xiao's legacy space.

The two of them walked the familiar path through the Ling family mansion and pushed open the study door. Hearing them come in, Ling Xiao lifted his head, and with a warm smile, he said, "Ling Lan, you've come..." Just like an extremely patient father who had been waiting unbelievably patiently for his own playful child to return home after playing their fill...

Ling Lan even had the mistaken feeling that, in these days which she had been absent, had Ling Xiao been sitting alone behind his desk all this time, just waiting for the moment she would open the door and walk in?

Ling Lan felt a pang run through her heart and her lips trembled. Finally, one word escaped her lips, "Daddy!" Although this cry was very soft, in this silent and tranquil study, it was unmistakably clear.

Ling Xiao, who had originally been sitting primly behind his study desk abruptly stood up at hearing Ling Lan's cry. Because of the rough movement, the study desk actually shuddered, several books piled on it falling noisily to the ground. Right then, Ling Xiao had no mind to bother about all this. Emotionally, he said, "Ling Lan, just now... what did you call me?"

Ling Lan saw Ling Xiao's low-hanging right hand curl into a tight fist. His eyes held

traces of pleasant surprise, and nervousness, as well as some inconcealable fear. Ling Lan would never have imagined that this strong man before her — who had stood at the pinnacle of humanity, the god-class operator Ling Xiao who was considered an ultimate weapon of the Federation —would actually have times when he was afraid... What's more, what he feared was that his child would be unwilling to call him 'daddy'.

Seeing this side of Ling Xiao, Ling Lan heart was a complicated jumble of feelings. She could not say whether it was joy or sorrow, but her eyelids actually felt a little strained and wet... Back when Ling Xiao was facing death, had he been just as scared? Afraid that she, who had never had him around to be a father, would not want to acknowledge him as a father?

"Daddy!" The first cry was undoubtedly the hardest. After pushing it out, the following cry seemed much easier. This subsequent cry of Ling Lan's was much clearer than her first, and it was also much louder.

"Hey!" Ling Xiao responded solemnly. His initially taut facial muscles instantly relaxed, and a large smile bloomed on his face. It was radiant and blinding, actually making it impossible to look at him directly — even Ling Lan, who was used to seeing gorgeous men, found herself dazed and bedazzled in that instant.

By the side, Little Four subconsciously swallowed, and gasped in awe, "I finally know now who Boss resembles..." He still remembered back when Boss was 6 years old, one smile from her was capable of stealing people's hearts and souls. Back then, he had puzzled over how Boss had this ability — looks like it had been inherited from her daddy.

Little Four's words caused Ling Lan to abruptly wake up from her stupor. She could not help but throw a glare at Little Four — what nonsense is this little idiot spewing now? She was Ling Xiao's child; hasn't it been said since ancient times that daughters resemble their fathers? Her resembling Ling Xiao was a perfectly normal thing!

Ling Xiao was undoubtedly in a great mood. In the past, he had always waited for Ling Lan to start speaking, but this time, he initiated conversation by asking, "Ling Lan, my child, do you need me to explain anything for you this time?"

Ling Lan shook her head. "Nothing at present. I've just come to tell you that we may not be able to come here in the near future for a period of time."

Hearing this, Ling Xiao was taken aback. "Why?"

Ling Lan chuckled dryly. "I need to go back to the mansion. There aren't any login devices tuned to the scout academy's virtual space there. If I want to come here, it's a little problematic."

Ling Xiao's initial excitement and joy gradually dissipated, and a trace of sadness swept through his gaze. Because it passed by so swiftly, lost in her own thoughts and emotions, Ling Lan did not notice.

After a beat of silence, Ling Xiao opened his mouth to say, "When will you be leaving, approximately?"

Ling Lan silently estimated the time her body needed to recover. "One month later at the soonest." One month later, even if her internal injuries were still not fully healed, she should be able to come out from the recovery pod.

"Then in this one month, try to take time to come here as much as possible," said Ling Xiao with a stern expression. Without his smile, he faintly exerted an invisible force of presence, causing Ling Lan to instantly feel pressured.

"Yes, daddy!" replied Ling Lan, standing tall reflexively.

Ling Xiao's looked long and hard at Ling Lan, as if trying to engrave Ling Lan's appearance into his heart. Under Ling Xiao's focused gaze, Ling Lan's palms were sweating from nervousness. As if sensing Ling Lan's anxiety and unease, a faint smile appeared on Ling Xiao's face. This smile made Ling Xiao's entire force of presence dissipate completely. Ling Lan immediately felt the invisible pressure upon her vanish; her entire person instantly at ease.

"Tell me about your mother. Is she well?" Asking about Lan Luofeng, Ling Xiao's entire being became extremely gentle, the unconcealed love in his gaze so saturated that one could almost wring water out of it ².

Seeing this kind of Ling Xiao, an old poem stirred in Ling Lan's mind — *the strongest score-forged ³ steel, turns to finger-twining silk*. When a man truly loves a woman, no matter how strong he was, he would willingly become finger-twining silk ⁴...

The faint melancholy in Ling Lan's heart rose up once more — if Ling Xiao had not died, he and Lan Luofeng would most certainly have been a heavenly couple. However,

the heavens were cruel, unwilling to lay eyes on such a perfect happy ending — it insisted on leaving it unfulfilled, thus engraving it in bone and heart ⁵.

Ling Lan slowly recounted bits and pieces of Lan Luofeng's life in these past 13 years. She spoke of her gentleness, her doting love, her petty shameless play-tantrums, her untiring nagging... as well as her rich descriptions of that perfectly flawless husband in her mind's eye...

At this point of her narration, Ling Lan saw a flash of pain pass through Ling Xiao's eyes, as well as a faint sense of regret, and even a trace of blankness.

The two of them — one seated, one standing — thus conversed half the day away. Only then did Ling Lan realise that there was actually a differentiation between day and night within the legacy space. The visibility inside the study gradually grew dim, as the sun outside the window gradually fell below the western horizon.

Chapter 180

Proud Of You!

Only then did Ling Xiao seem to become aware of the passing of time. He blinked and said, "Oh, it's this late?" He looked at Ling Lan and asked, "Are you leaving now?"

Ling Lan really wanted to say that she had stayed here for too long, that someone outside must already be looking for her. But, for some reason, Ling Lan found that she just could not spit those words out.

Even so, Ling Lan's silence had already told Ling Xiao that she really could stay no longer.

"Don't forget. This one month, find time to come here as much as possible!" Ling Xiao emphasized this point heavily once more, as if worried Ling Lan would forget.

Ling Lan nodded heavily. This was the first time she felt that leaving this place was so difficult, her heart ever so reluctant...

"Go!" That said, Ling Xiao waved a hand, and Ling Lan felt herself being pushed out by a sweep of energy. By the time she came to her senses, she was already outside the legacy space.

"Boss, let's go!" Ling Lan was not the only one who was reluctant; Little Four was just as reluctant. But they were really just out of time.

The two of them quickly returned to the recovery pod. They had not been back for 3 minutes when the recovery pod was opened to reveal Lan Luofeng's frantic and anxious face.

Ling Lan gave her mother a wide smile, soothing her by saying, "Mummy, I've woken up. I'm fine!" Ling Lan had really wanted to smile brilliantly, but the tears in her eyes began to flow uncontrollably...

Mummy, did you know that Daddy and I had talked about you all afternoon? Did you know that, when Daddy heard news about you, his face would emit a radiant light? Did

you know that, Daddy had to forcefully hold back the grief and regret he felt when he heard those wistful words you said while missing him?

Two people who were so obviously in love... why did they have to be so cruelly separated by life and death? For the first time, Ling Lan felt pain stab into her heart, on behalf of her parents of this life who loved her so.

"Ling Lan, is it very painful?" Lan Luofeng was frantic over Ling Lan's tears, thinking Ling Lan was in unbearable pain. Ling Lan shook her head and said, "It doesn't hurt. I'm just glad I'm still alive... Mummy, living is great, isn't it?" If Ling Xiao were still alive, would Lan Luofeng's life be without regrets?

"Yup, it's great as long as you're alive!" Lan Luofeng nodded emphatically, tears flowing down her face as well. As long as Ling Lan lived, even if she had to die immediately in exchange, she would be willing...

At times, Lan Luofeng would think to herself that, if Ling Xiao were still alive, no one would dare to lay a hand on her Ling Lan. But Ling Xiao had truly passed away so young. Without his protection, those despicable and avaricious people had targeted their child without reservation. From young, Ling Lan had learned on her own that she had to bear everything on her own shoulders...

Ling Xiao, oh, Ling Xiao, how could you bear to leave us behind? However much I love you, that is how much I hate you! A trace of resentment flashed through Lan Luofeng's teary eyes. For the first time ever, she had a grudge in her heart towards Ling Xiao.

Ever since Ling Lan woke up, her body was slowly recovering within the recovery pod. This news was greeted with great joy by everyone in the Ling family. If the family head holding up a family is out of the picture, the family would very easily collapse on itself.

After finding out that Ling Lan was fine, Ling Qin began a new round of investigative retrenchment within the Ling family mansion. For some of those family loyalists whose loyalty could not be guaranteed, Ling Qin sent them all out of planet Doha to other planets to expand the Ling family businesses. He needed to ensure that before Ling Lan returned to the Ling family mansion, that all the Ling family members remaining on Doha were loyal without question.

Ling Lan's multiple brushes with danger had thoroughly frightened this Ling family

chamberlain. He did not want Ling Lan to ever be in such crises again due to some negligence on his part. Ling Qin knew very well that luck would only work once or twice, but never three or four times. He needed to take comprehensive action ahead of time in order to ensure Ling Lan's safety.

At this moment, Ling Lan did not know that because of her, everyone in the Ling family had begun to move, trying to create a safe home for her to recuperate in peace. In this one month, she was busy sneaking into Ling Xiao's legacy space along with Little Four to meet Ling Xiao.

However, in this one month, Ling Xiao was obviously much stricter than before. The moment Ling Lan entered the legacy space, Ling Xiao would throw her into an assessment space to test all the abilities she had learned thus far. Even if she passed the assessment on a particular front, this did not mean that Ling Lan was free — the next time, the assessment would still be there, but its contents would have been raised by a whole difficulty level...

These kinds of pressure-test assessments allowed Ling Lan to gain a deeper understanding of all the abilities under her belt. Her initially already somewhat loosened and primed Qi-Jin at peak stage, under the continuous pressuring over the course of the month, successfully broke through to officially enter the optimal peak level of Qi-Jin. As long as Ling Lan continued to accumulate the Qi in her body, she felt that she would soon be able to peek into the profound secrets of Domain stage.

Still, Ling Lan had the vague feeling that she already seemed to understand what the profound secrets of Domain stage were — but that feeling was like a flash of lightning, slipping away before it could be caught. But Ling Lan believed that as long as the energy within her body accumulated till a certain level, she would perhaps then be able to know what the profound secrets of Domain stage were.

That great barrier that blocked off 99.999999999% of Houtian Domain masters from ascending to become Xiantian Domain masters ¹ — to her, was perhaps not that difficult...

This feeling was very intriguing; Ling Lan felt as if she were being informed by her own body's instinct. This pleased Ling Lan tremendously. Initially, she had thought that ascending to Domain stage would require luck and serendipity, that she may very well be stuck at this barrier for up to 5 to 10 years — perhaps even her whole life. But unexpectedly, the heavens favoured her so, actually bestowing such a cheat upon her...

In her excitement, Ling Lan told her father Ling Xiao what she was feeling. Ling Lan's strange feelings also caused Ling Xiao to be rather stunned. However, Ling Xiao did not believe that these feelings were untraceable, and so carefully asked her for a detailed accounting of everything that had happened in the recent past. When he heard that someone had borrowed her body to unleash Domain energy, Ling Xiao was pretty sure he now understood part of it.

Ling Xiao guessed that, because Ling Lan's body had felt Domain stage energy first-hand, its muscles had generated a type of Domain energy memory. Moreover, this memory would help Ling Lan grasp the profound secrets of Domain, and from there, lead Ling Lan into becoming a true Domain master. Regarding this, Ling Xiao could not help but admit that Ling Lan's luck was truly astounding — actually being able to benefit from misfortune under those kinds of circumstances.

However, Ling Xiao also believed that this muscle memory would fade away with the passage of time. Therefore, for Ling Lan to successfully advance to Domain stage, she would need to do so before this muscle memory disappeared. Otherwise, once enough time passed, the muscle memory would vanish, and this fortuitous catalyst would also be lost. At that time, for Ling Lan to advance to Domain stage, she would then have to do it the hard way like other people. She would have to continue to seek out chance opportunities to obtain the possibility of sudden insight.

Ling Xiao's words gave great joy to Ling Lan even as they burdened her. Indeed, this was her lucky chance — but whether or not she could take good advantage of it still depended on her hard work.

A month passed swiftly. On this day, Ling Lan once again came to Ling Xiao's legacy space. Ling Xiao did not act like before and throw Ling Lan into an assessment space, nor did he give pointers on Ling Lan's combat weaknesses and instruct her through learning exercises. At this moment, he was just sitting behind his study desk, deep in thought.

Seeing Ling Lan arrive, he stood up and slowly walked over to Ling Lan's side, and then hugged her close gently. "Ling Lan, my child, in this one month, you have worked hard. I am very happy seeing your growth."

Ling Lan, in Ling Xiao's embrace, felt her father's warm presence enveloping her. This

caused Ling Lan to breathe in silently. This was the first time Ling Xiao was hugging her — it felt so good that she almost lost herself in the sensation.

This kind of warm hug filled with the sense of safety, was an experience so distant within Ling Lan's memory, almost forgotten... Only when she experienced it again did Ling Lan know that she had always yearned for it inside her heart. She yearned for all of this... as expected, she was still a girl, somewhat sentimental! This was really not a good thing — her current identity did not permit her to be weak...

But, just this once, let her let loose and be selfish — let her revert to being a little girl for once, and freely enjoy the warmth and safety of her father's embrace. It was as if the wind and rain would be kept out by this strong and gentle man before her eyes — she could just hide safely within the nest of her father's arms.

"Time really went by so quickly, I don't feel ready to let go..." Ling Xiao's arms suddenly tightened around her, his entire presence shifting from its initial tender warmth into cold grimness. "But, a baby eagle must still leave its nest to fly on its own eventually..."

Ling Xiao slowly pushed Ling Lan away. "All I should have taught you, I already have. In the end..." Ling Xiao slowly reached out his right hand, and tapped Ling Lan lightly on the forehead. Ling Lan blinked blankly, then felt a surge of foreign memories rush into her brain, including some of the tasks Ling Xiao needed her to do after this.

Ling Lan stared dubiously at Ling Xiao, unsure why he would use this method to leave his final instructions.

Ling Xiao smiled gently, a finger lightly pressed to his lips, in a shushing motion, indicating for Ling Lan not to say anything. In his eyes, there was a trace of cunning.

"I believe the military has always been monitoring this area. In truth, I've sensed the presence of a foreign spiritual entity, but that spiritual entity does not seem to have any bad intentions, which is why I've ignored them. Still, some things, some legacies, should not be known to other people... it's fine if you understand, don't say anything."

These words by Ling Xiao rang out in Ling Lan's mind; it was uttered from the spiritual entity Ling Xiao had inserted into her mind just previously.

Ling Lan surreptitiously wiped the cold sweat off her forehead, unsure whether she should tell Ling Xiao of Little Four's existence. However, Ling Xiao did not give Ling Lan any opportunity to speak. He suddenly lifted his head to look out the study door

and said, "Although I really cannot bear to part from you, for your safety, I need to disappear now..."

Ling Xiao bowed his head, once more looking intently at Ling Lan, his eyes shining with relief and happiness. "Ling Lan, I am very proud I am your father. One day, you will create your own legend. Daddy is proud of you!"

That said, Ling Xiao beamed. The smile on his face this time was more radiant than any before it, dazzling to the eye, but Ling Lan did not get lost in its brilliance this time. Because, an indescribable sadness was rising in her heart at that moment — in Ling Xiao's smile, Ling Lan could see deeply hidden grief and regret. If it were possible, Ling Lan believed that Ling Xiao would never want to die — he would never choose to disappear from this world.

Chapter 181

The Disappearance of Ling Xiao's Legacy!

"Goodbye!" Ling Lan only saw Ling Xiao's lips move, leaving behind this one final word, and then she was chased out by a great force by Ling Xiao once more...

Ling Lan's mind had yet to settle when Little Four's expression became frantic. "Not good, Dad's legacy space is disappearing!"

Hearing this, Ling Lan was horrified. She tried to enter the legacy space again, but was barred. Even Little Four, this practically omnipotent god of the virtual world, had also been forcefully ejected by this powerful force of the legacy space, unable to find any way to get close...

At this time, Ling Xiao's voice rang out in Ling Lan's mind, *"Stop, my child. Please forgive this irresponsible father of yours. Please take on my responsibility, take good care of your mother, Lan Luofeng!"*

As this voice faded, Ling Xiao's legacy space also vanished from the virtual world of the scout academy, leaving no trace behind. It was as if Ling Xiao's legacy space had never existed.

"Boss, Dad... really disappeared..." Little Four abruptly appeared beside Ling Lan. In virtual space, Little Four could freely control his manifestation. And so, a little boy of about 5 to 6 years old clung to Ling Lan's sleeve, sad tears streaming endlessly from his eyes.

Little Four was so sad because he had not even had the chance to introduce himself to Ling Xiao, or call Ling Xiao 'daddy' to his face...

Ling Lan suppressed the urge to cry, patting Little Four gently on the head as she tried to comfort him, "Daddy didn't disappear. He will always be in our hearts, isn't that so?"

Ling Lan's words caused Little Four to become thoughtful. He held back his gushing tears, but just when he was about to say something, he noticed a notification from the virtual space. His expression turned grim and he said, "Boss, we need to leave quickly."

There are hackers and spectres approaching..."

Little Four quickly whisked Ling Lan away with him. In several flash steps, they were back in the recovery pod. As they ran, Little Four did not forget to wipe clean all traces of their presence within that virtual space. Little Four believed that, with the work of an intelligence-entity of his level, a normal person would not be able to find anything suspicious. However, Little Four was still very cautious. After sending Ling Lan back, he returned to the scene once again. He had considered it —if anyone found anything by accident, he would utterly destroy the scout academy's virtual world, deleting all data within it. He would not allow any danger to come to his Boss.

Just a few seconds after Little Four had run away with Ling Lan, five people suddenly appeared where they had been standing. Four of them were dressed in uniforms, while the last was wearing a black robe which cloaked his entire body, hiding his appearance. This was the standard outfit for spectres.

One of the men dressed in uniform, obviously somewhat higher in rank, said to the others, "It should be here. Go investigate and see if there are any abnormalities."

Receiving their orders, the other four began to move. Not long after, they reported their findings to the head.

"Colonel, there is no trace of the existence of a legacy space, and there is also no sign of one being moved by human measures..." said one of the uniformed members obscurely. He knew very well whose legacy space they were looking for. If it were lost, it would be an immeasurable loss for the entire Federation.

"Colonel, I have already successfully noted down all students who were in the area within these three hours. Here is the name list..." said another uniformed member as he handed a sheet of white paper over to the colonel. On it was a tightly packed list of student names.

The colonel accepted the name list but did not look at it. Instead, he turned to look at the black-robed man on the other side. "Lieutenant Colonel J, did you find anything?"

Lieutenant Colonel J was specially transferred by the military from another specials team to assist them. With regards to the other's details, the colonel did not know much, and even the other's face was unknown to the colonel. However, the colonel was not annoyed by this. He knew that no one had the right to know the true identity of a

spectre other than the spectre's direct supervisor. These were all necessary measures set in place to protect spectres.

Every country maintained comprehensive monitoring on spectres. In particular, if an enemy nation's spectre was discovered, all attempts would be made to kill them off. The moment the spectre's real identity was exposed, as long as there was any chance of killing the other, a nation would choose to make a move even if it had to pay a steep price.

This was because there was no way at present for human society to be separated from the virtual world completely — and spectres were existences equal to death gods in the virtual world. No matter how strong a person was in real life, the moment they entered the virtual world, if they were targeted by a spectre, they pretty much had no chance of escape. It should be said that spectres were a type of balance-disrupting existence to the virtual world. Their death-god-like ability was feared and distrusted by all the people in power, regardless of their nationality...

Lieutenant Colonel J indicated for the colonel to wait patiently, and then he spread out his spectre ability, beginning to sense the chaotic energy in the surroundings.

Meanwhile, the colonel took the opportunity to scan quickly through the name list in his hands. Seeing no one clearly suspicious on the list, he handed the document over to the uniformed member standing beside him all this while, saying, "Let the monitoring room dig out the information on all the people on this list. Investigate it thoroughly, don't let anything at all suspicious slip through."

"Yes, Colonel!" The uniformed member left swiftly after accepting the document.

After sensing for a moment, Lieutenant Colonel J said, "I don't sense the remnant energy of any other spectre." A spectre's energy signature can only be sensed by another spectre. "The disappearance of the legacy space should have nothing to do with spectres."

Hearing what Lieutenant Colonel J had to say, the colonel let out a breath of relief. If this incident had truly been caused by the infiltration of an enemy nation's spectre, he would probably have been court-martialled and inevitably charged with dereliction of duty.

"However..." Lieutenant Colonel J's voice carried a slight tone of confusion, "The

remnant energy here makes me feel a little uncomfortable."

"Ah?" said the colonel excitedly, "have you sensed something strange?"

Lieutenant Colonel J shook his head and said, "That's not it. Perhaps the self-destruction of the legacy space produced some energy that affects my spectre abilities." He could not explain it. This was just a gut feeling of his, not a sense of danger. That energy he sensed just made him feel extremely uncomfortable, as if somewhat repulsive to his spectre abilities.

The colonel instantly understood what Lieutenant Colonel J was trying to say. A legacy space left by a god-class operator would most certainly carry some of the god-class operator's spiritual energy. These energies were extremely powerful — if spectres could be said to have a counter, these god-class masters would be their only rivals in the virtual world. Their spiritual power was formidable enough that even these death gods could do nothing against them.

After figuring it out, the colonel cast Lieutenant Colonel J's words into the back of his mind. Instead, he began to worry over how he could account for the disappearance of Ling Xiao's legacy space to his superiors. Even though he had escaped the fate of being court-martialled, he still needed to find a reasonable explanation for this freak phenomenon! So, with a woebegone expression, he asked, "Then, Lieutenant Colonel J, can you guess the reason for the legacy space's disappearance?"

Lieutenant Colonel J contemplated the issue in silence for a moment, then said unhurriedly, "Actually, there are many reasons why a legacy space would disappear. One, would be due to outside interference, which would mostly be due to spectre abilities. Another, would be that the legacy of the legacy space has already been passed on. Once an inheritor completely masters everything the legacy space has to offer, to ensure the exclusivity of the inheritor's legacy, the legacy space would choose to self-destruct..."

The colonel's eyes lighted up. "Are you saying that, it is possible for that legacy space to have been successfully inherited by someone?"

Lieutenant Colonel J nodded lightly. "Yes, that is one of the possibilities. Of course, another possibility is that, the legacy space's creator had set a final deadline. Once that deadline is exceeded, regardless of whether the legacy space was inherited or not, it would still begin its self-destruct sequence."

The colonel had initially been thrilled by hearing of the possibility of the legacy being inherited, but what Lieutenant Colonel J had to say next about a self-destruct deadline caused his face to fall. He truly did not wish for Ling Xiao's legacy space to have disappeared because of the latter reason — this would be such a heavy loss for the Federation.

Right now, he could only hope that it was the second of the three possibilities listed. As long as they could find Ling Xiao's inheritor, then they would be able to obtain all of the secrets to Ling Xiao's ascension to god-class operator status from the inheritor. At that time, even if they could not use those secrets to ascend to god-class, the Federation would probably be able to produce mass numbers of top-notch mecha operators and dominate the entire human world. The Federation's dream of being at the top of the world would be realised!

Having received an investigative report, the colonel had no mind to continue staying here in this virtual space. He immediately led his team of five away from the scene.

They had not left for long when Little Four's figure appeared where they had been standing. His little face was extremely grim, and he muttered to himself, "Spectres, eh? Rather impressive, as expected..." That said, he disappeared once more.

Meanwhile, at this time, both in the virtual space and in reality, the news of the disappearance of Ling Xiao's legacy space had already gone viral ¹. Because there had never been confirmed news that Ling Xiao's legacy space had chosen an inheritor, all the students had remained extremely passionate in trying to crack this mysterious legacy space. There was attention on it at all times, so when the legacy space disappeared, the news immediately spread like wildfire among the students. The military, which had wanted to keep the matter under wraps, had been completely caught off-guard.

The only relief was that, aside from some of the upper ranks of the military and the academy's dean, no one else knew who had been the creator of the legacy space.

The military's investigation continued on in secret. The upper ranks of the military were leaning towards the explanation that the legacy had been inherited successfully. Therefore, they ordered strict monitoring and investigation on those people who had engaged with the legacy space over the past month before its disappearance. The moment anything strange was discovered, these students would be apprehended and brought in for covert questioning.

For this purpose, they even transferred in some hypnotists from particular special ops teams to hypnotise the children to try and find out the truth. However, all these seemingly suspicious students turned out not to be Ling Xiao's inheritor. This outcome disappointed them, and also made them anxious — their movements began to intensify, no longer being as covert as before.

Chapter 182

I Want to Become Strong!

These actions drew strong opposition from the purely academic faction within the scout academy. They felt that these measures by the military was obviously making light of the wellbeing of their students. Although the Federation declared that hypnosis was harmless to the human body, and the general public believed that, the experienced teachers in the scout academy knew that hypnosis was actually a form of spiritual attack. It would cause some cracks and holes to appear in the spiritual self of the one being hypnotised. This would affect the children's future development, especially those who wanted to become mecha operators or starship navigators. Spiritual damage was especially taboo for those two career pathways.

From the start, the Central Scout Academy had been the gathering grounds of almost all the top 3 tiers of exceptional children. All of these children were very likely to become excellent soldiers in the future — the loss of any single one of them would be a loss to the Federation. Thus, the pure-academic faction, with Dean Ye Yifan at its head, made the decision to chase out the monitoring military staff currently within the campus. They needed to protect their students! Moreover, Ling Xiao's legacy space was gone; it was unnecessary for these monitoring staff to remain in the Central Scout Academy.

The upper ranks of the military were naturally unwilling to just give up on Ling Xiao's legacy, but there was a pure-academic faction within the military upper ranks as well which supported the Central Scout Academy's decision. On top of that, the Grand Marshal also seemed to be on the side of the Central Scout Academy, so the military had no choice but to agree to withdraw the monitoring team trying to reclaim Ling Xiao's legacy.

In fact, this intense backlash from the Central Scout Academy was in large part due to the sudden unfounded suspicion towards Ling Lan by one of the senior officers in the monitoring team. The team had then requested the right to interrogate Ling Lan from the academy. This caused Mu Shui-qing, who had been watching over Ling Lan all this time, to become livid, and also spurred the dean of the academy, Ye Yifan, into an explosive rage.

Mind you, for this past month or so, Ling Lan had been calmly lying within a recovery pod, with no way of logging onto the virtual world. Without any shred of evidence whatsoever, the military had actually dared to submit such a preposterous request — this made the instructors of the pure-academic faction of the academy unbelievably mad.

Especially once the academy found out that the fake teachers who tried to assassinate Ling Lan had come about due to the negligence of the monitoring team... one of their teams had been secretly killed and replaced while returning from the outside and the monitoring team had not noticed the problem, which had allowed the opponents to successfully infiltrate the Central Scout Academy and obtain the chance for an assassination.

Their negligence had already caused their student to receive such severe injuries, and they still wanted to take things one step further to destroy their student's future? Did they really take the Central Scout Academy to be pussycats? Here for them to push around as they liked? Enraged, the Central Scout Academy no longer gave any face to the military. They immediately threw an eviction notice at the monitoring team. This forceful measure let the monitoring team know that the matter was thoroughly out of their control now — although they tried their best to negotiate, it was all useless.

It should be said that the monitoring team had done a very stupid thing. Not only did this suggestion enrage the Central Scout Academy beyond reason, even the pure-academic faction within the upper ranks of the internal military itself was extremely angry. Even the Federation's Grand Marshal expressed extreme displeasure with their actions.

In the end, with no way of salvaging the situation, the monitoring team could only slip away from the Central Scout Academy with their tails between their legs. Meanwhile, Ye Yifan had taken this opportunity to fire almost all of the teachers within the academy who were not focused purely on academics. Only a small portion, with true skills but not much influence, managed to remain at the end of this great spring cleaning...

Of course, this series of events was generally unknown to the scout students. They only knew that some of the teachers they were familiar with were gone, while some new unfamiliar teachers had emerged. However, there would always be new teachers appearing every year anyway, so the students did not find it strange.

Still, the military needed to come to a final verdict for the disappearance of Ling Xiao's legacy space. In the end, the military chose the final possibility as proposed by Lieutenant Colonel J. Ling Xiao must have set a final deadline when he had first created his legacy space. Whether or not his legacy was inherited, when the time came, the space would self-destruct.

This deduction made perfect sense and was accepted by a majority of the upper ranks. Although an extremely small portion of the upper ranks still insisted on believing that someone had obtained Ling Xiao's legacy — they believed they just had not found the inheritor yet. However, when they heard that the Grand Marshal had approved the military's submitted verdict, they knew the tide had passed. They could only regretfully give up on their investigations — no one would dare to question the Grand Marshal's decision. And so, the disappearance of Ling Xiao's legacy space ended without any great trouble, becoming one of the military's unsolved mysteries.

The furore over the disappearance of Ling Xiao's legacy space faded into tranquillity with the passage of time. Meanwhile, after resting for a full month and more, the condition of Ling Lan's body was getting much better. When Lan Luofeng found out that Ling Lan was able to come out from the recovery pod, she decided that it was time to pack up. Three days later, they would return to the Ling family mansion.

In these 3 days, Lan Luofeng was extremely busy. She submitted a request for the academy to process Ling Lan's withdrawal from the school; this was undoubtedly against Federation regulations. However, considering the special circumstances — Ling Lan's body still needed time to recover, and Mu Shui-qing was exerting pressure on Ye Yifan — the academy compromised. Ling Lan would have to return to the school in three years time to take the academy's final exam and apply for further enrolment at a military school or some other specialised academy then. After obtaining this promise from Lan Luofeng, the scout academy agreed to Ling Lan's withdrawal request.

News of the assassination attempt against Ling Lan during the grand armed melee had spread across the whole academy after the grand armed melee. The 7th grade, in particular, found out that Ling Lan had only been attacked by enemy nation assassins after successfully dispatching the top student of the 10th grade. If academy teachers had not arrived at the scene in time, Ling Lan might very well have been killed. This aggravated the entire 7th grade as a whole, because they knew very well that if Ling Lan had not dispatched the top rank of the 10th grade before he had been taken out, the winners of the grand armed melee was likely to have been the 10th grade...

Considering what might have been, the 7th grade was filled with hatred for those enemy nations of the Federation ¹. Qi Long and the others of Ling Lan's group of friends, were especially livid. They wished they could personally find those killers and tear them into pieces.

Lan Luofeng knew what the truth of the matter was, but also knew that this was politics. For unity, security, and to fan the patriotism of the students, some lies needed to exist, while some truths needed to be buried. Lan Luofeng did not want to be at odds with the country's political machinations — as long as they could give her a satisfactory accounting, she would not concern herself with these trivial things. Thus, she chose to look the other way.

Qi Long and the others were extremely worried about Ling Lan's condition. While Ling Lan was still unconscious, they kept coming to visit him, and so they knew that the damage to Ling Lan's body was severe enough to require a long stay at home. Ling Lan could no longer continue to attend school with them at the academy. This news saddened them, especially Qi Long. After finding out the news, he ran off on his own to a combat room for a punishing round of training. In the end, it was still Han Jijyun who managed to coax him back out.

Even so, the other members of Ling Lan's team could clearly sense the change in Qi Long. Although he seemed as outgoing and straightforward as ever, it was as if there was a rumbling volcano inside him. Though everything looked normal on the outside, no one could tell when he would explode...

Han Jijyun was half pleased and half worried at this condition of Qi Long's. He was pleased because Qi Long had become much more proactive over matters involving Boss Lan, displaying much more initiative. But he was also worried because he was afraid Qi Long would be unable to bear the pressure he put on himself, and crumble under it in the end...

Han Jijyun clenched his fists silently, telling himself that he must work hard. He must not let Qi Long walk down the path of self-destruction. Whenever Qi Long lost his way, he would step up to show him the way...

When official news of Ling Lan's withdrawal from school came out, Qi Long's group, including Han Xuya and Luo Chao, as well as the original members of group 072, all

came to make their final farewells with Ling Lan.

Filled with reluctance, the group came to stand before Ling Lan. Right then, Ling Lan was seated in a technologically-advanced wheelchair. Seeing the group here to say goodbye to her, Ling Lan's heart was filled with happiness.

However, when Ling Lan saw Qi Long's appearance, her brows twitched into a slight frown. Observant as ever, she had noticed something off about Qi Long.

"Qi Long, come here." Seeing Qi Long's state, Ling Lan was instantly in a bad mood. She coldly ordered Qi Long to come and stand beside her.

Qi Long excitedly walked over to wait for his boss's instructions, but Ling Lan did not say anything. With a flick of her finger, Ling Lan sent an ice bead smacking into Qi Long's forehead, causing Qi Long's head to bend back involuntarily.

Qi Long grimaced at the pain, his right hand flying up to press and rub at his forehead. He shouted, "Boss, why did you hit me?"

Ling Lan's ice bead had left a dark red mark on Qi Long's forehead. It was clear that Ling Lan had not wanted to be soft on Qi Long. "Seeing your current state, I just feel annoyed and really want to hit you."

Confused, Qi Long asked, "Why, Boss? Aren't I doing quite well?"

"Quite well? What's up with your angry-at-the-world attitude?" sniffed Ling Lan. Ling Lan could clearly sense the bottled rage Qi Long had stoppered up inside him.

Qi Long was silent. His hanging arms curled into fists, the veins on the backs of his hands becoming obvious. He did not even seem to notice even when his nails left deep marks on his palms. Should he tell Boss Lan how much he hated his own helplessness?... If he had just been a little stronger, Boss Lan would not have had to fight on his own.

Qi Long knew that despite the all-around lock on the communicative functions on their communicators during the grand armed melee, Boss Lan could bypass those restrictions. So, Boss Lan could easily have notified them when he was being attacked. But even when Boss Lan's life had been hanging in the balance, he had still chosen not to contact them, fighting on his own instead. Qi Long knew that this was because Ling Lan did not want to bring them into danger. But from another perspective, this proved

that they were just too weak to help Ling Lan...

"Smack!" A cold staff-shaped weapon rapped the backs of Qi Long's hands, leaving behind a red line. "What are you doing? Self-mutilating? I don't have such a wimpy follower," said Ling Lan coldly, an ice-staff in her hands.

Ling Lan's words caused Qi Long's feelings to become unbalanced, his breathing becoming ragged as his chest rose and fell noticeably. He blurted out, "Boss, I want to become strong!"

Ling Lan's brow quirked. "Why?"

"I don't want to just stand behind you anymore. I don't want to see Boss hurt but be helpless to do anything about it. This feeling sucks..." Qi Long mumbled lowly. His fists clenched tight once again, and he lifted his head to shout abruptly, "So, I want to become strong enough! I want to be able to fight by your side, Boss, and become your left and right arms, true sworn brothers that can brave life and death together..."

Chapter 183

Latent Problems and a Mission!

Ling Lan was stunned by these words. She had not expected herself to be the cause of Qi Long's sad state. At this moment, Qi Long had lost his mental balance due to his desperate need to grow stronger. Although being more proactive and more aggressive than before was a good thing, it was not so easy to strengthen one's combat arts just like that. The process needed the accumulation of time. If she did not have the learning space, which multiplied the amount of training time she had by manyfold — just relying on the time she had in real life, it would have been impossible to achieve the peak stage of Qi-Jin...

It should be said that something had gone wrong with Qi Long's mental state. If this issue was not resolved soon, it would definitely be a great latent danger to Qi Long in future.

After weighing the matter for a moment, Ling Lan said, "Qi Long, I'm very happy you think this way. In future, we may be deployed to a battlefield. At that time, I hope that you will be the one protecting my back!"

Qi Long eyes blazed, his entire being coming to attention. Ling Lan was clearly telling him that he had high hopes for him; this increased his intent to become stronger — he definitely would not let Boss down.

"But, Qi Long, it's not that easy to become strong. It cannot be rushed. You need the accumulation of time..." However, Ling Lan's following words made Qi Long's heart sink. Was Boss Lan refusing him? Perhaps he wasn't a genius, and so could not keep up with Boss' footsteps?

"I hope that you will take things a step at a time and build your foundations well. Then you'll be able to go higher in the future," said Ling Lan slowly.

"But that way, the distance between us will just keep getting larger," said Qi Long agitatedly.

Ling Lan's brow quirked. "How could it? You will just be getting closer and closer to

me."

"Huh?" Qi Long was struck dumb by Ling Lan's words. For a moment, he just could not understand what Ling Lan meant.

Ling Lan coolly pointed at her body and said, "What is the condition of my body?"

Qi Long lowered his head and said, downcast, "You need to recuperate for 3 to 4 years!" This was what the Ling family had announced to the public.

"Qi Long, this is the price!" said Ling Lan, self-mockingly, "Although the damage to my body was caused by the assassination attempt by enemies this time, my body is damaged so badly mostly because I had some latent problems remaining from breaking through too quickly before that."

In her heart, Ling Lan silently confessed her sins to any passing gods. For the sake of her little follower's future, she could only lie. Honestly, Ling Lan's words were not entirely a lie — if Ling Lan had not possessed the godlike cheating device, the learning space, even the most talented of prodigies would have had to pay an everlasting pyrrhic price to achieve her current level of strength.

"How can this be?" Ling Lan's words shocked all of her little companions. They could not believe that their Boss Lan, who seemed so formidable and level-headed, would actually do such a foolish thing.

Ling Lan swept her gaze in a circle over her companions before her and said tonelessly, "Because I did not want to lose to my father..." Ling Lan lifted her head slightly, as if holding back her emotions. Very quickly, she lowered her head again, and when she faced them once more, she was back to normal. "But my talent is no match for my father's. No matter how hard I train, I still cannot reach the pace of my father. Slowly, I felt the gap widening so I became impatient. Thus, at a moment not really suitable for breaking through, I still chose to break through."

Qi Long and a few others knew who Ling Lan's father was, so they did not reveal any signs of surprise at hearing this. In contrast, the faces of the others who had no idea who Ling Lan's father was were filled with bewilderment as they stared at Ling Lan. In their eyes, Ling Lan was already so aberrantly prodigious that they could only look up to him... but now, Ling Lan was saying that he was completely no match for his father... Then, how aberrant was Ling Lan's father exactly?!

Ling Lan saw the stupefied expressions of the others, and instantly realised that they probably still did not know that her father was Ling Xiao. It looked like before Qi Long and the others had gotten explicit permission from her, they had not told any of the others about this information. Her heart was instantly filled with gratitude and affection for them. A thought passed through her mind, and she said, "Can't figure it out? How can there be someone so aberrant?"

Han Xuya, Luo Chao, and the others nodded their heads vigorously at Ling Lan's words. They really could not figure out who could be so aberrant and terrifying to cause the seemingly all-powerful Boss Lan admit defeat.

"My father is Ling Xiao!" The corners of Ling Lan's lips twitched upwards. She could not conceal the pride she felt that her father was just that aberrant.

"Ah!" Han Xuya was the first to scream in shock. A great lover of mecha, she naturally knew what the name Ling Xiao represented.

"God-class operator!" In their astonishment, the others could not help but gulp. In their hearts, Ling Xiao was like a deity — they would never have dared to even think of relating anyone by their side to him.

After a fit of excitement, the companions quickly calmed down. They looked at Ling Lan with gazes of admiration and also sympathy. They admired that Ling Lan's father was the god-class operator Ling Xiao, but also pitied Ling Lan for actually trying to challenge that publicly acknowledged number one prodigy. It would have been more of a shock if he *hadn't* lost badly!

Ling Lan felt somewhat awkward under these stares. In any case, she really had no intention of comparing herself to her father, but this excuse was just more convincing. She coughed and then turned to look at Qi Long, and said, "Qi Long, even though I managed to force a breakthrough successfully, I hurt my foundations. So, I have no choice but to rest for a long period of time after being injured this time. Do you also want to be like me? Lying in a bed for 4 to 5 years, maybe even longer?"

Qi Long shook his head emphatically. He did not want that. He just wanted to be able to stand by Boss's side when he needed him, and not just have to watch helplessly, or even be protected by Boss. Therefore, his desire to become strong would never change. At most, he would be a little more careful, making sure not to rush as much when trying to break through in his physical skills training.

Qi Long's gaze shone with his determination. Ling Lan sighed internally — why was this brat so stubborn? For the first time, Ling Lan had a bit of a headache. It was really so goddamn difficult to be someone else's boss. How could she get rid of Qi Long's tenacious way of thinking?

"Qi Long, you're actually cornering yourself now." Ling Lan suddenly thought of the upcoming mission of the 7th grade, and her eyes lighted up. She felt that she had a way to solve the problem now. Since she could not find a way to suppress Qi Long urgent desire to become strong, then she would give him a safe way to become stronger. "Physical skills are not the only path to becoming stronger."

Qi Long threw a confused glance at Ling Lan, unsure what Ling Lan wanted to say.

"In this world, the strongest people are not physical fighters, but mecha operators," reminded Ling Lan, "Just like my father Ling Xiao, although his physical skills were only at Domain, he still became a god-class operator, the Federation's ultimate weapon. This is an existence that even God-Realm masters cannot compare with."

"And after this, you all will be going to complete the virtual world barrier-crossing mission. This was my original goal. Although I can't go anymore now, that doesn't mean I've given up on this goal. So Qi Long, as the team leader, and as my follower, you need to finish it for me."

Looking at the level of Qi Long's team right now, this mission was totally at an S-level difficulty. Hearing Ling Lan's command, Qi Long's spirits rallied. He pounded his chest and said, "Don't worry, Boss, I will complete this mission."

"This is just the first step. After entering the real virtual world, go and learn how to operate mecha. Three years later, when I return to the academy for the tests, I hope you will all have successfully advanced to intermediate mecha warrior or higher. Especially you, Qi Long, you need to be at advanced mecha warrior level."

"Why?" asked Qi Long, confused.

"Didn't you want to become strong?" said Ling Lan calmly, "An advanced mecha warrior can match up with an early stage Domain master. At that time, you will have the right to stand beside me and fight alongside me."

Qi Long's gaze glimmered. He had finally found a shortcut to becoming stronger. 3 years, and he would have the right to stand by Boss's side. For him, this path was much

more secure than physical skills.

Qi Long nodded solemnly and said, "Alright, Boss, I will definitely complete this goal. Three years later, I will definitely become an advanced mecha operator."

"Alright, if you all don't achieve this objective, three years later, just wait for my punishment." Ling Lan's tone was cold and ominous when she said this, causing everyone else besides Qi Long to shiver involuntarily, their expressions paling noticeably.

Mind you, to rise up from newbie trainee to intermediate mecha warrior in three years' time was an absolutely tough challenge. Even if they had not truly experienced what it was like to learn mecha control, they still knew that it required a massive amount of points to upgrade mecha within the virtual world. These points needed to be earned by winning mecha fights. Even more frightening was the fact that, once they lost, an equivalent of the number of points they would have won would be deducted from their accumulated score. This rule had caused many people to become stuck with the label of newbie even after 2 to 3 years, because their total score was still in the negatives.

For them to successfully advance to intermediate mecha warrior in 3 years, they needed to maintain an extremely high win-rate, perhaps even not lose at all... this was completely impossible!

Face ashen, Han Xuya could not help but open her mouth to plead, "Can the requirements be lowered for us girls?"

Ling Lan swept a glance at the other, "If you think it's impossible, then it's better to just not go and not learn how to operate mecha."

Ling Lan's merciless words caused Han Xuya's face to turn even paler, and she could not help but argue, "I remember that even the most impressive person in the virtual world needed 3 years and 3 months to advance from newbie to intermediate mecha warrior. How can we succeed?"

"That is just on public records. As far as I know, there is one person who only used half a year to become an intermediate mecha warrior from a newbie, in total using just one year to become an advanced mecha warrior," Ling Lan casually described a fact she knew.

"How could that be? Who was he?" Han Xuya's first reaction was to disbelief it.

"My father, Ling Xiao!" replied Ling Lan calmly.

"Uncle Ling is a god-class operator, and also the globally recognized number one prodigy. How are we supposed to compare to him?" said Han Xuya feebly. Her cry of 'Uncle Ling' made Ling Lan's face twitch. Mind you, the Ling Xiao in the legacy space had been a stunning pretty boy — completely incompatible with the title of 'uncle'.

Ling Lan kept her face slack with all her might, and continued to say, "Which is why I asked you all to do it in three years. That's 3 times more time than what Ling Xiao used to advance. You should know that in the same three years of time, Ling Xiao had already advanced to ace operator status. You all should also know that for a mecha operator to advance to ace operator status is a natural chasm. Many people remain stuck in this chasm for all their lives, unable to break through... Compared to this, my request is already low enough."

Chapter 184

Divine Command Sect!

Han Xuya still wanted to say something to that, when Luo Chao beside her frantically used her hand to block Han Xuya's mouth. Han Xuya was so shocked by this that she did not even struggle, completely forgetting what she wanted to say.

Luo Chao's action stunned all the other companions — was this still their shy little sister Luo Chao? They reflexively glanced at Ling Lan, sighing in their hearts — Ah, as expected, love can truly make one go wild...

Seeing everyone looking at her, Luo Chao realised that she had overreacted. Embarrassed, she pulled her hand away and hid behind Luo Lang. In an instant, the bashful little sister Luo Chao had returned.

Ling Lan pretended not to see everyone's somewhat knowing gazes. Instead, still maintaining an ice-block face, she asked coldly, "How about the rest of you? Do you all think it's impossible?"

At this moment, the few people who had been through the fires of battle on planet Demonbeast abruptly recalled that, back then, it was the 10 year old Ling Lan who had expertly handled a mecha. Ling Lan had even managed to kill off an X-series ace mecha squad of the Twilight Empire. It was without question that Boss's mecha control skills were already at a terrifyingly advanced level. If they did not take advantage of these three years to work hard and give chase, the moment Boss's body recovered, they would most certainly be left even further behind by Boss...

Qi Long's initially steady heart became even more determined. Han Jijyun, Luo Lang, and Lin Zhong-qing were also on board. They silently clenched their fists, each setting their own goals within their minds — not to become an intermediate mecha warrior which Ling Lan had asked of them, but to become an advanced mecha warrior like with Qi Long. They too did not want Ling Lan and Qi Long to leave them behind.

Seeing the elder brothers all promise to complete this mission in 3 years with faces filled with determination, Luo Chao gazed at Ling Lan admiringly. *This was Boss Lan.* Only Boss Lan could convince all the elder brothers to promise to accomplish such a

nigh impossible mission...

Without question, in Luo Chao's budding heart, Ling Lan was definitely a perfect boy. Strong, authoritative, charismatic, and reliable. Although Ling Lan could sense the leanings of Luo Chao's young heart, she did not know what to do about it. Thus, she could only pretend not to know anything, and hope that being apart from her for 3 years would be enough to weaken Luo Chao's affections, until the point where they could fade away without a trace.

Just like that, Ling Lan left the Central Scout Academy, seen off by her little companions. She returned to the Ling family mansion, and continued to recuperate for a period of time. During that time, the Central Scout Academy sent over countless medicinal agents, along with some precious cultivation resources. In particular, several tubes of special-grade gene agent would be sent periodically. Combined with the gene agent that Ling Lan received from the inheritance, this allowed Ling Lan's body to recover even faster. Her body had initially been estimated to recover in a year, but after only 8 months it was fully healed with no worry of latent problems.

After Ling Lan's body had fully recovered, Mu Shui-qing asked her to come to the place where he had secluded himself.

The moment Ling Lan arrived, the already waiting Mu Shui-qing asked, "Do you know why I asked you to come here?"

Ling Lan shook her head, but then quickly nodded instead. With a smile, Mu Shui-qing patiently waited for her explanation.

Ling Lan said, "I shook my head because I am not very sure, but then I nodded because I know that you, teacher, will definitely tell me."

" A child with great daring ¹!" Mu Shui-qing could not help but laugh heartily. Ever since Ling Xiao had passed away, this was the first time he was laughing so freely. Both father and son ² were truly worthy of being nature-defying prodigies capable of upturning the heavens and earth... they would always take him off guard with pleasant surprises — being able to take them in as his disciples was truly his great luck.

Mu Shui-qing finally restrained his laughter and continued to say, "Indeed. Asking you to come here, I have some things to tell you. I am one of your father's initiate instructors... Of course, this is just on the surface. In fact, your father is my true

disciple." True disciples and initiate disciples were two completely different concepts. For initiate disciples, he only needed to give them some pointers, but for true disciples, they were the inheritors of their sect — it could be said that, at that point, the instructor-student relationship was just like that of a father and son.

Ling Lan thought for a moment, then said, "Then how should I address you? Master's Master?"

Mu Shui-qing did not know whether to laugh or cry. "Just call me 'master'!" Since he would be teaching her hands-on, then Ling Lan would truly be his true disciple. What else should he call him but 'master'? Besides, he really did not care about any seniority issues. In their sect, once you joined, only the relationship within the sect mattered.

Ling Lan rubbed her nose, rather speechless. If she called the other 'master', then wouldn't she be on the same seniority level as her father Ling Xiao? Was she then supposed to call her own father 'senior brother'? Ling Lan was somewhat conflicted.

However, Ling Lan's spirits quickly drooped. Even if she called Mu Shui-qing 'master', she would have no chance to call her father 'Senior Brother Ling Xiao' anyway! In that case... why should she be conflicted? After thinking things through, Ling Lan did not continue to tie herself into knots. She called out, "Master!"

"Good! Good! Good! This is how my good disciple should be. Efficient in whatever you do, make sure to never be indecisive. On this point, you are better than your father," said Mu Shui-qing happily.

Hearing this, Ling Lan thought back on the feeling Ling Xiao had given her in the legacy space. Her father had seemed pretty decisive and efficient, not at all indecisive like how Mu Shui-qing said he was... however, Ling Lan quickly cast these thoughts aside, because Mu Shui-qing had begun to speak again.

"Our sect emphasizes the basics. Everything begins from the basics, so now I will be teaching you the foundational physical skills of our sect..."

"Um... Master, I already know this," said Ling Lan hurriedly.

Ling Lan's words flabbergasted Mu Shui-qing. "How do you know it?"

Ling Lan smiled wryly and said, "Master, our sect is the Divine Command Sect, right?"

Mu Shui-qing leapt up in shock. "How do you know this?" The Divine Command Sect had always been passed down one-to-one — ever since Ling Xiao died, he was the only one left... could it be that there were still others of the Divine Command Sect?

An almost imperceptible smile appeared on Ling Lan's lips. "My father told me."

As if realising something, Mu Shui-qing said with an expression of astonishment, "Ling Xiao's legacy space. So you received it."

A trace of mockery appeared on Ling Lan's lips. "It should have been mine from the beginning." Ever since she found out about the inheritance method of the Divine Command Sect, Ling Lan knew very well that Ling Xiao's legacy space had been specially prepared for her.

"Yes, that thing should indeed belong to you... the military was just a little greedy, that's all," said Mu Shui-qing, sighing. He could understand what the military did, but some things were not able to be obtained just because one wanted them... the requirements for the Divine Command Sect were too high — the requirements on spiritual power were especially stringent. If Ling Xiao had not accidentally activated his spiritual power and broken past an obstruction through sheer luck, rising up by three whole levels, even he might have had to give up on the Divine Command Sect. On this front, Ling Lan's talent was obviously better than Ling Xiao's, because Ling Lan's spiritual power was innately strong.

"Since you've already received your father's legacy, I won't have to teach you the basics again." Mu Shui-qing was in a great mood. This meant that Ling Lan would finish his studies with him much earlier than he could have imagined. At first, he had been somewhat regretful that he had sought out Ling Lan this late, causing Ling Lan to miss the most opportune timing to learn from the Divine Command Sect. This would make it much harder for Ling Lan to learn and practice the foundational physical skills, perhaps even multiply the time he needed to master them. Unexpectedly, Ling Lan had long received Ling Xiao's legacy, and thus had not missed the best timing at all.

"Yup. In the end, right before father disappeared, he told me to find you to learn the final Divine Command technique," Ling Lan passed on Ling Xiao's final message.

After a startled pause, Mu Shui-qing immediately understood what Ling Xiao was aiming for. Ling Xiao had wanted him to know that an inheritor still existed for the Divine Command Sect. He had wanted to deliver Ling Lan to him personally, to try and

make up for the pain and regrets he had left his master with when he had departed.

Mu Shui-qing's eyes turned red and he jerked his head up to look at the sky. His voice was choked with tears as he said, "Ling Xiao, my son, even in death you were worrying about this old man, eh? So you've personally sent me hope, giving me motivation to live on..." How lucky was he to have taken in such a good disciple? It was a shame that he and Ling Xiao's teacher-disciple relationship had been so brief, lasting only a mere 10 years' time...

Mu Shui-qing's words made Ling Lan realise as well why Ling Xiao had not chosen to pass on the ultimate technique of the Divine Command Sect to her. Since Ling Xiao had already completed his discipleship, he must have already mastered all the techniques in the Divine Command Sect. He had chosen not to pass it on to Ling Lan, because he had wanted her to seek out Mu Shui-qing and tell his master through her that the heir of the Divine Command Sect still lived.

Ling Xiao wanted to comfort his master in this way, but of course, there was also the intent for Ling Lan to take on his responsibilities, just like how he had tasked Ling Lan with the care of Lan Luofeng at the beginning.

Of course, Ling Xiao may also have had the thought of training up Ling Lan's persistence, asking Ling Lan to seek out the elusive Mu Shui-qing patiently to train up her tolerance. However, he had never expected that Mu Shui-qing was just living within the Ling family mansion. Moreover, not too long ago, due to the assassination attempt on Ling Lan, Mu Shui-qing had been coaxed out of seclusion by Chamberlain Ling Qin's pleading, and had then stayed by Ling Lan's side to protect her. Subsequently, when Mu Shui-qing had set eyes on Ling Lan, he had been prepared to teach her already.

It had to be said that Ling Lan's luck was truly amazing — everything had just fallen into place effortlessly.

A long while after, Mu Shui-qing finally calmed down. He looked at Ling Lan, and the affection in his eyes was apparent. Right now, in his eyes, Ling Lan was not only the only heir of the Divine Command Sect, he was also the hope his good disciple Ling Xiao had given to him. At this moment, no matter how he looked at Ling Lan, his heart was filled with joy and appreciation.

"Since you are already at the final step... then let me first assess your spiritual power.

"Let me see if you meet the requirements to learn the final technique." Although Mu Shui-qing's heart was filled with fondness for Ling Lan, he was still very strict in the passing on of the final technique. It should be known that the skills and techniques of the Divine Command Sect all depended on the strength level of an individual's spiritual power. If Ling Lan did not meet the minimum requirements of the Divine Command technique, for Ling Lan's sake, he would not teach it to him.

"Okay~!" Ling Lan nodded. That said, her spiritual power began to spread out. Very rapidly, it split into countless invisible spiritual threads, each roughly as thick as a finger. These threads flew towards Mu Shui-qing, but this time, Ling Lan encountered resistance. About a metre away from Mu Shui-qing, she sensed a strong shield made of spiritual power defending Mu Shui-qing on all sides.

Chapter 185

Three Years Later...

"Spiritual charge!" A strong spiritual charge was sent lashing out at Mu Shui-qing. But when this spiritual charge ran into the other's spiritual self, it only created some ripples in the other's spiritual barrier, and then swiftly disappeared.

With this one attack, Ling Lan knew that her master's spiritual power was definitely thick and substantial — normal attacks would do nothing against it. Sure enough, Mu Shui-qing shook his head and said, "With just this bit of power, it is impossible to learn the Divine Command final technique."

Ling Lan's brows furrowed, now knowing that she would not be able to pass the assessment if she did not put her full strength into it. So, she clenched her teeth and decided to use the strongest spiritual attack she had —— spiritual blast!

Of course, the strength of one spiritual blast was probably not enough to budge Mu Shui-qing, so Ling Lan immediately brought out the charged four-part blast she could do right now to attack.

To achieve a four-part blast, Ling Lan would divide her spiritual power into four cords and then detonate them separately. The blasts would stack up layer by layer, making the power of the spiritual blast several times stronger. By the time the fourth cord of spiritual power exploded, the force created would be 8 times her initial spiritual blast. It was plain to see that this stacking of the spiritual blasts was copied by Ling Lan from the activation method of One-Inch Punch, and could be considered one of Ling Lan's self-created spiritual attacks.

Ling Lan carefully condensed her spiritual power into four spiritual cords as thick as her arm. Then, with clear sequencing, she sent them stretching out towards Mu Shui-qing layer by layer. Just as they were about to make contact with Mu Shui-qing's spiritual shield, Ling Lan shouted four times inside her head, "*Explode! Explode! Explode! Explode!*"

Invisibly, the four cords of spiritual power exploded one by one in the air. In the space where the two stood, violent turbulence appeared in the formless air, layer after layer.

When the final spiritual power cord exploded, the layered force of the spiritual blasts crashed like a tidal wave onto Mu Shui-qing.

When Mu Shui-qing's spiritual shield met this immense spiritual turbulence, a subtle change came over his expression. He clapped his palms together, and with a grunt, the spiritual power shielding his body was reinforced...

"Boom!" Two waves of spiritual power collided violently in the air. Although Ling Lan could not physically hear the sound of the collision, the feedback force being transmitted by the air clearly showed that the concussive force of this collision was definitely far beyond any of her previous spiritual blasts.

The powerful concussive force was directly reflected onto Ling Lan's body. The power surge came too quickly and too fiercely — Ling Lan had no way to stabilise herself. Her entire body was sent flying back by the reflected force to crash onto the ground.

Meanwhile, several powerful tremors ran through Mu Shui-qing's body, his complexion paling noticeably, but he quickly recovered.

Still, even though both of them were ultimately fine, Mu Shui-qing's courtyard had been utterly destroyed by the collision of the two spiritual powers. The powerful concussive force had blown everything in the courtyard into dust — even the walls of Mu Shui-qing's home had cracks running through them now, looking as if they would crumble at any moment. It was clear to see how fearsome that turbulence had been.

With a nimble backflip, Ling Lan was back on her feet. It looked like she had not been injured by any of the reflected force, but her complexion was still extremely pale — it seemed that the four-part spiritual blast was quite taxing for her.

"You brat. Actually being so harsh..." Mu Shui-qing looked at Ling Lan somewhat speechlessly. This brat really had no notion of respecting his master — coming out so strongly with such a powerful spiritual attack right from the start. Also, he had proved himself to be a determined fellow... it should be known that it was extremely painful to execute a spiritual blast — a regular person would not be able to tolerate the pain.

Ling Lan just stood there, face pale. Right then, spasms of pain had begun to throb at her forehead. The spiritual blasts had drained too much of her spiritual power; she was already at the point of exhaustion. However, she endured the intensifying pain, as well as the nausea rising in her chest, and said, "If I am not harsh with myself, I would

have long died at another's hand."

At these words, Mu Shui-qing felt a pang of bitterness run through his heart. He naturally knew what Ling Lan was referring to. Ling Xiao's achievements had shone too brightly, leading many unscrupulous people to cast their greed upon his legacy and wealth. As Ling Xiao's only legal inheritor, Ling Lan's existence was undoubtedly a thorn in their side ¹ that these people would do anything to remove. If Ling Lan was out of the picture, they would be able to blatantly claim the legacy and wealth that Ling Xiao had left behind. In order to achieve this purpose, they had schemed, plotted, and manipulated both on the surface and from the shadows — till now, Ling Lan must have grown up in a storm of blood and violence.

"Sorry, I should have come see you earlier..." Mu Shui-qing was filled with remorse.

"Master, you being in the Ling family is my protective talisman." Now Ling Lan finally understood why when the Ling family side branch had plotted to take away her inheritance right, the military had chosen to remain silent and let them do as they would, but had not dared to make their support clear. A large part of it must have been because they feared Mu Shui-qing, who had been stationed within the Ling family. That was why they had not dared to go too far. Also due to Mu Shui-qing's existence, her mother Lan Luofeng had had enough courage to set a trap for the Ling family side branch. And this was also the true reason why the side branch had obediently left Doha after losing that wager...

It could be said that Mu Shui-qing's decision to seclude himself in the Ling family mansion had protected Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan to a certain extent, causing any others who coveted Ling Xiao's legacy to have no choice but to retreat temporarily.

"Good! With you, Ling Xiao has an heir! Right now you should just train your spiritual power further. Three months later, I will officially teach you the Divine Command final technique." Mu Shui-qing's heart was alight with joy. He reached out his hand to pat Ling Lan on the shoulder and conveyed his decision.

"Many thanks, Master!" Ling Lan bowed.

Three years' time went by in the flick of a finger... when spring once again descended as expected on planet Doha one fine spring day, before the sun could fully crawl out

from the horizon, when the first rays of dawn had barely stretched out their feelers, at the main entrance of the Central Scout Academy, five red-clad youths were already standing there. They seemed to be waiting for something.

One of the youths, with a strongly-built body, had an anxious expression on his face. Every so often, he would breathe in and breathe out deeply, trying to calm his turbulent emotions.

The guard at the entrance, who normally would not allow any scout students to step out one foot from the gates, was ignoring this group of people. He remained seated at his service station, sipping his cup of tea breezily.

It wasn't that he did not want to catch them, nor had he been bribed by the party — it was just that he could do nothing against these fellows except watch them. They were all 10th graders from the strongest team in the scout academy, and their team leader was known to be the strongest student in the academy.

Even if the guard had wanted to pull them back inside the gates, he just did not have the capability to do so! The guard smiled wryly as he shook his head and continued to ignore the group.

Although the Central Scout Academy imposed many strict rules upon its students, as long as you were strong enough, those rules would be like a sheet of white paper — free for you to scribble on as you like. This was why the guard had no choice but to leave them be. If he really wanted to make all of them submit, other than mobilising the academy's mecha squad, there was truly no way of doing so.

Beside the anxious young man, another red-clad youth's expression was distinctly different. He leaned lazily against the boundary wall, a helpless expression on his face as he said, "Leader, does it have to be this early? Isn't it just Boss Lan coming back to take his test today?" That said, he yawned widely, as if still half-asleep, some crust still hanging at the corners of his eyes.

Before the anxious youth could answer, a pretty and graceful youth standing beside him, with a frail scholarly air about him, cool and quiet, had reached out a hand to slap the other's head. He said coldly, "Welcoming Boss back is a huge thing. What are you blathering on about?"

The indolent youth grimaced, rubbing his sore head where he had been slapped. His

sleepiness had been chased away, and he said unhappily, "Luo Lang, can you watch your image? Don't be so rough, okay? Clearly looking so ladylike, yet being so fierce when hitting someone..."

"What did you say?" Luo Lang blew up. The thing he hated the most was others saying he looked like a girl. Ever since they had entered puberty, compared to his other companions, who had all bulked up and become more rugged, filled with masculinity, his looks had inclined towards willowy grace instead. Other than a slight increase in height, he pretty much looked exactly the same as his twin sister Luo Chao. It was a running joke among the companions that if Luo Lang cross-dressed and pretended to be Luo Chao, sitting down, no one would be able to tell the difference.

The indolent youth was not afraid of Luo Lang's rage. He suddenly clapped both his hands together in front of him as if in prayer, a trace of bashfulness appearing on his face as he stomped a foot down and whined coyly, "Aiya, my lovely prince Luo Lang, could you please come have tea with me this afternoon?" That said, he batted his lashes with all his might at Luo Lang. He had perfectly re-enacted how Luo Lang had been propositioned these last two years by well-built women, a scene which at one point had been the laugh of their team.

"Xie Yi, you're asking for it!" Luo Lang was really livid now. His pert face was flushed bright red, but this shade of anger just added colour to Luo Lang's cheeks, making him even more alluring. Since young, Luo Lang's temper had not been the best. He had always liked to let his fists do the talking, which was how he had become friends with Qi Long. Right now, hearing Xie Yi tease him, he immediately put up his fists and leapt at Xie Yi, intent on giving him a good beating.

Xie Yi's and Luo Lang's strength were about equivalent; the two of them began to exchange blows right there by the school gates, happily tangled up in one another. The guard sitting at his station found his face twitching uncontrollably as he watched them... He could only hope that these two fellows would be careful not to destroy school property around the gates as they fought.

"Alright, both of you, stop!" said a cold-faced handsome youth at one side. It was Han Jijyun. He had noticed that their leader Qi Long's mind was not here, so it was pointless to rely on him to stop these two from fighting. Thus, he had no choice but to speak up instead. This was because he could already sense the resentful stare coming from the guard station behind them.

Perhaps the team members respected the authority of their strategist, Han Jijyun, for after hearing him order them to stop, the two fighters drew back their fists and legs. Luo Lang sniffed coldly, then turned his head away from his opponent. On the other hand, Xie Yi scratched his nose idly, and then sticking both hands into his pockets, he ambled leisurely back to his original spot.

Behind Qi Long, emitting his usual gentle air, Lin Zhong-qing said to the returning Xie Yi with a smile, "Xie Yi, coming here earlier is actually not a bad thing. Let us admire the sunrise! I think it's been a while since we've watched the sun rise!" Over the past three years, in order to complete the goal Boss Lan had set for them, they had not dared to play around; all of their time had been spent on learning mecha control. Fortunately, not too long ago, they had all reached their goals, and so could finally relax.

Yes, the five people waiting here at the school gates at the crack of dawn were Qi Long, Han Jijyun, Luo Lang, Lin Zhong-qing, and the youth who had joined them after that grand armed melee three years ago, Xie Yi. Today was the day when all the scout students applied and sat for the enrolment tests of the various military schools and other vocational academies. Consequently, their Boss Lan would be returning to the Central Scout Academy for the first time in three years to participate in the academy's final graduation assessment.

Chapter 186

Ling Lan Returns!

Xie Yi could not help but purse his lips at Lin Zhong-qing's words, saying, "I really just can't figure you guys out. Training desperately these past 3 years in mecha control, almost to the extent of forgetting to sleep and eat... are Boss Ling Lan's instructions really that important?"

By the time Xie Yi had joined the team, Ling Lan had already withdrawn from the academy and left. Therefore, he wasn't very clear about Ling Lan's revered status within the team, and just could not comprehend why the goal Ling Lan had set would cause everyone in the team, including the team leader, to be so driven. The average person would not have been able to endure the sort of training the children had put themselves through which had almost bordered on self-torture. However, Qi Long and the others had persevered — holding on for a whole 3 years. It was as if they would be caught and devoured by a savage beast chasing from behind if they had stopped.

Of course, Xie Yi had suffered greatly these three years as well. His teammates had all been like wound-up springs, training fervently — the amount of training they did was mind-blowing. Despite no one forcing him to train with them, seeing all his teammates training diligently beside him, he could not help but submit to the immense pressure to train too...

In short, Xie Yi felt like he had been living in hell for these past three years. Along the way, he had sometimes cursed himself back then for being so naive and clueless, being so easily tricked into joining their team... But Xie Yi did not want to be left behind by his team members, and so he had actually managed to endure it all, obtaining results that he would never have imagined on his own. Moreover, over these three years, Xie Yi had been completely integrated into the team. At this time, even if they tried to kick him away, he himself would cling onto Qi Long's thigh and refuse to go.

Xie Yi's question caused Lin Zhong-qing to begin to reminisce. His smile deepened, and he nodded heavily at Xie Yi and said, "That's right. Although the nominal leader of our team is Qi Long, the true soul of our team is Boss Lan." He then advised Xie Yi, saying, "Xie Yi, remember this. Even though we've all acknowledged you, for as long

as Boss Lan does not acknowledge you, you will never be a true member of our team."

Hearing this, Xie Yi's face fell. "So, I still need to gain the approval of Boss Ling Lan?" After three years of working hard beside these companions, Xie Yi had long considered himself as part of the team.

Luo Lang chimed in with a cold sniff, tone proud as he said, "That goes without question. Xie Yi, you should be careful. Don't keep fooling around all the time. Boss Lan isn't as easily taken in as we are." Luo Lang did not forget to step on Xie Yi while he was down ¹.

"Luo Lang, you've known Boss Ling Lan for so long, you must know what Boss Ling Lan likes. Come on, tell me..." Xie Yi seemed to have forgotten all about his earlier fight with Luo Lang. He began pestering Luo Lang, trying to get some information on Ling Lan so he would be able to play to his favour.

"Boss Lan is very fair and objective, don't think of getting by with tricks..." Although Luo Lang's words were still curt and cold, his tone had obviously gentled a little.

"No, definitely not. How would I be so shameless? Don't you see how I'm trying now to understand our Boss Ling Lan a little better? Oh Luo Lang, my good brother... earlier, it's all big brother's fault. Don't be angry, ok? Right now, big brother is in trouble. You need to help big brother a little, right~?" Xie Yi was someone who was 'people-smart' ² — clearly sensing the easing of Luo Lang's attitude, he immediately intensified his efforts like a snake slithering up an extended stick ³. Expression tragic and pitiful, he reasoned and pleaded with Luo Lang. The thickness of his skin made the other three youths look askance at him. They could not help but take a few steps back and pretend not to know this shameless fellow.

"Hmph, so now we're brothers? What did you say about me earlier?" A triumphant smile appeared on Luo Lang's lips. His prideful glee made the other three step back a little more. Fine! These two were truly a quirky pair! When their tempers were riled, the two of them fought like cats and dogs — definitely no sign of any brotherly affection whatsoever. But when the two of them got along, their relationship was so harmonious that they could almost share the same pair of pants.

Sure enough, under the bombardment of Xie Yi's candy-wrapped missiles, Luo Lang caved. He began to tell Xie Yi about what he knew of Ling Lan's personality and principles. However, his explanations caused the three people beside the pair to lose

control of their facial muscles once more... was the Boss Lan being described by Luo Lang really the boss they knew? Why couldn't they relate his descriptions to the image they had of Boss in their minds at all?

As the sun slowly rose higher into the sky, and the few waiting youths began to become a little restless, Qi Long suddenly said, "Looks like he's here..."

The other youths all looked towards Qi Long, and Han Jijyun said with a raised brow, "Animal Instinct?" Qi Long's innate talent Animal Instinct was very strong — he would often sense a change in the surrounding environment a step before them.

Qi Long nodded, indicating that Han Jijyun was right. His innate talent Animal Instinct had indeed sensed the vibrations in the air, letting him know that a large convoy was approaching. And today, all of the 10th grade students taking the assessment were already inside the academy. The only one coming here now would be Boss Lan.

10 minutes later, at the horizon, a massive airborne team was slowly approaching them. Right at the front were two miniature mecha. At their chests was the emblem of a fiery red phoenix in flight. As it was a family emblem, there was a black ring outside the flying fire phoenix.

The colour of the ring represented the family's rank. Families were ranked from top rank, to rank-1, rank-2... and so on in sequence until rank-7. In total, there were eight ranks. Gold was the highest rank. Typically, only large and powerful families, which were generally elite families with long-standing legacies, had the right to bear this colour. Within the Federation, there were two top rank families — the Li family and the Ye family.

There were four rank-1 elite families represented by the colour purple. They were the reclusive Northeastern Muqi, the Old Martial Beitang, the Empyrean Zhuge, and the Hundredfold Zhou.

Meanwhile, there were obviously many more rank-2 families, which were represented by the colour bright yellow. Rank-3 elite families used orange, rank-4 red, rank-5 blue, rank-6 green, and rank-7 black. Rank-7 was the most humble of small families, pretty much encompassing all areas of the Federation. Any average family who possessed personal armed bodyguards fell into this category, and the colour they could use was black.

If the Ling family had not split off from the original Ling elite family, they would have borne the red of rank-4 families... Initially, the Ling family had not modified the totem on their mecha, continuing to use their family totem with its red outer ring. This was because the fire phoenix was red in colour, and along with the flames blazing brightly beneath it, many people would overlook the red of the outer ring, taking it as part of the flames. At a glance, all most people would see was a totem of a fire phoenix being reborn in a wash of flames...

However, the original totem was retired after Ling Lan returned home to the Ling family mansion at 13 years old. Lan Luofeng, Ling Qin, and the others had felt that it was time to hand over the Ling family to Ling Lan. Once there was an official change in the family head, the totem would be changed to match the status of the family head. Since the Ling family had cut ties with the Ling elite family, then it no longer had the right to use the red of rank-4 families. Furthermore, as family head, Ling Lan did not have any battle exploits nor societal status, and so could only use the lowest ranking black ring.

When Qi Long saw the totem, he exclaimed in excitement, "It really is Boss!"

Closely following behind the two mecha were three black hover cars flying almost abreast of each other, while behind the hover cars were two more miniature mechas tailing closely. This formation was clearly meant to protect the black hover car right in the middle. The gazes of Qi Long and the others all honed in on that hover car. In particular, Qi Long was nervously clenching his fists. His palms felt as if they were a little damp.

The speed of the flying convoy was not very fast, perhaps it could even be considered slow, as if it were waiting for something. The answer was soon revealed as the roar of mecha engines suddenly reverberated throughout the academy. A squadron of mecha flew out swiftly from the within the academy, moving forwards to meet the convoy. If it had just been hover cars, the mecha squad would not have bothered. However, they could not let down their guard with the addition of the four miniature mechas.

Seemingly receiving the mecha squad's permission to enter, under the watchful guard of the mecha squad, the convoy began to accelerate and speed towards the academy gates. Just before they were to arrive, the four miniature mecha suddenly separated to hover in mid-air at four corners, going into a defensive stance. Meanwhile, the hover car in the middle began to descend, slowly gliding down towards the school gates. In the end, it stopped not 10 metres away from the gates.

Qi Long's group of five was just about to approach when a strong sense of danger swept over them. The two miniature mecha closest to them almost simultaneously aimed their beam guns at the group. If they continued to move forward, countless beam shots would rain down on them.

"Ling Yu, they are my friends!" A cool voice rang out from within the hover car. This caused the two miniature mecha to immediately be at ease, pulling back their beam guns.

"It really is Boss!" That familiar voice instantly excited Qi Long and the others. Sure enough, their boss was back!

The doors of the hover car finally swung open, and a youth dressed in a red uniform bent over with his head bowed to get out of the hover car. Black military boots stomped confidently on the ground. The youth stood up straight and lifted his head to look in the direction of Qi Long and company.

Qi Long and the others felt an intense gaze sweep over them — they couldn't help but puff out their chests and suck in their tummies, standing up straight in response.

Then, an extremely subtle smile appeared on the lips of that sculpted cold face.
"Companions, I am back!"

"Boss..." Qi Long and the others pounced at Ling Lan emotionally. Qi Long's speed was the fastest — he was the first one to embrace Ling Lan. His eyes were red, and his voice was choked with tears as he said, "Boss, I've waited for you for so long."

The last three years, he had trained desperately, all in the hopes that one day he would be able to truly stand by Ling Lan's side, so they could become brothers who could watch out for one another and brave life and death together... and today, he had finally seen this day arrive.

Ling Lan patted Qi Long's back lightly, "Yes, I know. Which is why I've come back."

Qi Long suppressed the upheaval in his heart, reluctantly letting go of Ling Lan. But before he could say anything else, he had been shoved aside by Luo Lang. Luo Lang grabbed Ling Lan and hugged her tight, fiercely snuggling against her, as if seeking comfort. "Boss Lan, I've missed you to death."

This action of Luo Lang's rendered Ling Lan completely speechless. Who the heck was

this? When did their team take in a girl? She slowly pushed away the clingy Luo Lang, and after giving him a close look, voice cracking, she said, "Luo Lang? How did you grow up to look like this?"

This punk Luo Lang had actually grown up to be even more feminine than she had — was there still any reason in this world?! This harsh reality deeply wounded Ling Lan's fragile soul. She raged in her heart: *Hells, I am the one who's a girl, alright?!*

Chapter 187

My Role?

Luo Lang's face turned bright red at Ling Lan's shocked question. If it had been anyone else, Luo Lang would definitely have raised his fist and punched them, but Ling Lan was his most respected, most loved, most idolised Boss Lan! And besides, he couldn't win against him anyway...

Unsure what to do, Luo Lang could only stand there helplessly. His lost demeanour actually added an extra tinge of softness to his appearance, truly prompting pity and affection in others. This caused the wailing in Ling Lan's heart to escalate: Boo hoo hoo... this brat's existence was absolutely meant to harass her. How was she to live with this cruel reality?!

Ling Lan's question caused Xie Yi, who was standing by the side, to burst out into laughter. Finally finding a scapegoat for his anger and frustration, Luo Lang roared and pounced at Xie Yi, and a grand battle broke out once more.

But this time, no one was willing to bother with either of them; even Han Jijyun, who would usually rein them in, did not have the mind to care about them at the moment.

"Boss Lan, long time no see!" Forcefully holding back his emotions, Han Jijyun peered closely at Ling Lan standing before him. Although he had not lost his composure like the others, the typically stoic expression on his face was gone, replaced by a clear expression of pleasant surprise.

Ling Lan hugged Han Jijyun abruptly, patting his back forcefully as she said, "Jijyun, these past three years, it's been tough on you."

Han Jijyun's strategic planning was definitely instrumental in ensuring that Qi Long's team remained secure as the strongest team of the academy. It should be known that Wu Jiong's team and Li Yingjie's team were both extremely strong teams as well — both those teams must have always been eyeing the throne of Qi Long's team ravenously all this while.

Truthfully, those two teams were no weaker than Qi Long's in terms of capability. In

fact, it might even be said that they were a hair better, because they were full teams with all 6 members, while Qi Long's team was lacking Ling Lan and so had always been operating with just 5 people. Inherently lacking, for them to maintain their status as the strongest team, Han Jijyun had played a major role with his careful planning and thoughtful manipulations. Without Han Jijyun, no matter how strong Qi Long became, the team would not have been able to fend off the combined challenge of the other two teams.

The approbation in Ling Lan's words almost caused Han Jijyun to break out into joyful tears. Ling Lan recognised all his efforts over these past three years! At this moment, he finally understood the meaning behind the phrase 'a gentleman would die for a patron who recognises his worth' — having a boss like Ling Lan, was truly his good fortune.

Ling Lan released Han Jijyun, and her gaze shifted to look at Lin Zhong-qing. She walked forwards and bumped her shoulder lightly against his. This action, reminiscent of the silent communication between sworn brothers, caused Lin Zhong-qing to be filled with shocked joy. Could this mean that Boss Lan had truly accepted him now, and would begin viewing him as a brother of equal status with Qi Long and the others? He could not help but croak out, "Boss Lan..."

"Yes!" An extremely small smile appeared on Ling Lan's lips, but Lin Zhong-qing still noticed it. That smile told Lin Zhong-qing that he was not mistaken.

After interacting with Qi Long, Han Jijyun, and Lin Zhong-qing for a bit, Ling Lan looked over at the other two still embroiled in their fight. Curiously, Ling Lan asked, "That's Xie Yi?" Ling Lan recalled Qi Long telling her that he was accepting a student called Xie Yi into their team when she had left the academy. And that person was the combat expert hiding within Class-B whom she had inadvertently discovered during the grand armed melee.

Qi Long nodded and said, "Yes. He's not bad. Willing to train hard with us, just shy of joining us at the advanced mecha warrior level."

Ling Lan's gaze glittered. "Looks like you all are getting along well."

"Yup, this punk's skin is really thick. He is capable of anything... even we can't take it sometimes," said Lin Zhong-qing, chuckling wryly. He had thought that he was extremely unflappable, that his skin was already thick enough, but compared to Xie Yi,

he was really just in the kiddie league — Xie Yi's behaviour showed him what thick-skinned really was... his shamelessness knew no bounds.

Lin Zhong-qing's words received Qi Long's and Han Jijyun's agreement. All of them believed that no matter what kind of environment Xie Yi was placed in, he would be able to live on resiliently...

Hearing Qi Long's and the others' opinions on Xie Yi, Ling Lan glanced contemplatively at Xie Yi. Perhaps he would be able to fill in the gaps of Qi Long's team... of course, this was with the prerequisite that Xie Yi knew what he was supposed to do.

Ling Lan then asked, "How long are they planning to fight for?"

"Until Luo Lang's tired," said Lin Zhong-qing with a laugh. They all knew that the person who really wanted to fight was Luo Lang; Xie Yi was just going along passively. So, when Luo Lang no longer wanted to fight, the fight would be over.

"Then let's just leave them to it." That said, Ling Lan began walking towards the academy gates. When she had left her home, she had been carefully observing the time. She had no intentions of letting her final assessment be affected by her being late. Even though she was not aiming to enter the top military school, that didn't mean that she did not want to enrol in the other schools.

Seeing Ling Lan make a move, Qi Long, Han Jijyun, and Lin Zhong-qing decisively left the two fighting people behind and followed Ling Lan through the academy gates.

Xie Yi, who had been keeping a close eye on Ling Lan's actions, saw that Ling Lan had already entered the gates, and quickly shouted, "Luo Lang, Boss Ling Lan has entered the academy!"

"Ah..." Engrossed in the fight, Luo Lang had not noticed this at all. He hurriedly stopped fighting, and seeing the backs of Ling Lan and the others entering the school gates, he shouted out, "Boss, wait for me!" He frantically ran after them, leaving his fighting partner Xie Yi behind.

"How heartless!" complained Xie Yi. If he hadn't pitied Luo Lang for his plight earlier, he would not have laughed and given Luo Lang a way out to vent his embarrassment. Of course, there was another reason for his obvious laughter. Back when Ling Lan had first faced the others, those true emotions revealed had made him feel like an outsider, which made him very uncomfortable. Thus, he had taken the chance to tease Luo Lang,

egging him into a fight to push aside this feeling.

"So I have to get Boss Ling Lan's acknowledgement? How troublesome..." Xie Yi frowned, ambling unhurriedly after Luo Lang to enter the school gates.

Still, he did not wish to be excluded by the others anymore! Xie Yi found that he really hated that.

Luo Lang and Xie Yi very quickly caught up to the others. The six of them slowly walked to the nearest hover car stop, and prepared to take a hover car to the assessment centre.

While they were waiting, Xie Yi thought for a moment, then walked over to stand before Ling Lan. He said seriously, "Boss Ling Lan, I'm called Xie Yi. Leader Qi Long and the others said that only if I obtain your acknowledgement will I be a true member of the team... I hope that Boss can acknowledge me."

Ling Lan glanced at Xie Yi coolly. This glance gave Xie Yi a chill, as if he had been laid bare by it. Initially filled with confidence, he suddenly began to doubt himself... could he really obtain Ling Lan's acknowledgement?

He didn't know how long he waited — perhaps it was just a second, or perhaps it was 30 to 40 seconds — when Ling Lan finally responded, "Why should I?"

Xie Yi rallied his spirits and replied, "I will not hold the team back."

"There are many who won't hold the team back. You're not indispensable," answered Ling Lan indifferently.

Xie Yi was struck dumb by Ling Lan's words. Dammit, can't he tell that he was just being humble?! Was he supposed to be blatantly honest and say that he was the best at fighting, and that his strength was top-shelf material?! Xie Yi's expression was awkward, but this moment fully displayed the extreme thickness of Xie Yi's skin. He regained his composure once more and said with a laugh, "Of course, I can also fight very well."

"To join our team, it's the most basic thing to be able to fight well."

Xie Yi choked once more on Ling Lan's merciless words. True enough, he finally felt the legendary difficulty of Boss Ling Lan — he was truly impervious against flattery

and common tricks ¹, utterly unpredictable. That stony expression, that unruffled tone... Xie Yi really had no clue where he should apply force.

He could only chuckle bitterly and fall silent. This time, it was his loss; he could only retreat for now.

Right then, a hover car arrived. Ling Lan was the first to board, followed closely by Qi Long and Han Jijyun. Meanwhile, Lin Zhong-qing, Luo Lang, and Xie Yi were prepared to take the next hover car.

Han Jijyun had just boarded, the car door still open, when Ling Lan suddenly turned her head to say to Xie Yi, "Xie Yi, what do you think your presence can bring to the team? When you can answer this question, then I will give you a clear answer!"

Ling Lan's words had barely faded when the car doors closed. Han Jijyun keyed in their destination on the hover car's A.I., and the hover car sped off into the sky, quickly disappearing into the distance.

Xie Yi was taken aback by Ling Lan's parting words. He had thought that Ling Lan would not be giving him a response today, so he had already been planning to work on it for the long haul. Unexpectedly, Ling Lan had suddenly thrown him this question. Even as it boggled him, he was a little lost, because he had never thought about what he could bring to the team.

"Xie Yi, what are you blanking out for? Come in quickly!" Luo Lang's impatient shout came to his ears. Xie Yi blinked and saw that Lin Zhong-qing and Luo Lang were already on a hover car, waiting for him to board. He quickly boarded and closed the car door.

The hover car flew swiftly towards their destination, but Xie Yi's heart was fully occupied by Ling Lan's question. *"What do you think your presence can bring to the team?"*

Really, what can I bring to the team? Strength? I cannot match Qi Long, and am even slightly weaker than Luo Lang, only just a little stronger than Lin Zhong-qing and Han Jijyun. But Han Jijyun's role is that of the team's tactician, so his combat power has never been the most important thing, while Lin Zhong-qing...

Xie Yi thought back on the role Lin Zhong-qing played in the team, and found that for every mission, all the information, mission-appropriate equipment, and necessary

medicinal agents, had all been prepared perfectly by Lin Zhong-qing... it looked like Lin Zhong-qing had secured himself the role of being an excellent logistics support for the team.

Only then did Xie Yi realise that everyone in the team had their own designated role. Moving on to the second strongest, the bad-tempered Luo Lang — at the start of every mission, he would fulfil the role of advance guard. He would scout ahead and test the surroundings, reporting the situation back in a timely manner to the team. And whenever he did this, Luo Lang would always complete his duties perfectly.

Meanwhile, the team leader Qi Long had always been in charge of coordinating the team. In contrast, he had always been lounging on the fringes, simply moving wherever the team went. Now, thinking back, he had not known what position he played in the team at all. This was probably the reason why Boss Ling Lan had asked him this question.

That's right, what gave someone the confidence to say that they had the right to become a true member of the team when they themselves had no clue what their own position was in the team? At this thought, cold sweat broke out across Xie Yi's entire body. He had really been such an idiot...

"No, I am not an expendable person on the team. I will definitely find a role that belongs only to myself. But... what is the role that would suit me best?" Xie Yi felt that his brain was a muddled mess. Groggy and confused, he unknowingly found himself already at the assessment centre.

Chapter 188

Applying to a School!

Watching Xie Yi drift down soullessly from the hover car, the waiting Ling Lan could not help but furrow her brows. Could it be that the little fellow had been struck too deeply by her words and had incurred a spiritual wound?

She looked dubiously at Qi Long, her eyes filled with questions. *D*mm it, didn't you all say that this guy was very thick-skinned? Why did he fall into such a sorry state from such a minor setback?*

To Ling Lan's questioning gaze, Qi Long could only shake his head firmly, indicating that he knew nothing.

Of course, after Ling Lan shifted her gaze elsewhere, Qi Long could only murmur in his heart, *'That also depends on who the opponent is. A humanoid weapon like you with such horrific killing power — what does it matter how thick one's skin is? Your power is still unbearable!'*

At this thought, Qi Long couldn't help but glance sympathetically at Xie Yi, donating a handful of compassionate tears for his plight of almost collapsing under a simple jab by Boss Ling Lan... Thinking back, this was also how I, your big bro, endured till this day!

"Xie Yi, are you really planning to apply for the First Men's Military Academy in this state?" Xie Yi was suddenly jolted out of his thoughts by a familiar cold voice.

Ling Lan was staring at him coldly. The ice in his eyes caused Xie Yi to shiver involuntarily — he could actually feel the same pressure as when he stood before some instructors. It had been a long time since he had felt that sensation.

"If you lose here, then you will really have no right to become a member of our team." Ling Lan's warning made Xie Yi gather his emotions. There was no room for him to consider all these complicated things right now. Only one thought remained in his head — he could not fail here. He must succeed in enrolling into the First Men's Military Academy, and then prove himself worthy of becoming a true member of the

team.

Seeing Xie Yi regain his equilibrium, Ling Lan let out a silent breath of relief. If her previous words had caused Xie Yi to stumble and make a mistake during the assessment, then she would have committed a grave sin.

The few of them arrived at the assessment point specially set aside for the First Men's Military Academy. Almost all of the Central Scout Academy's 10th grade boys eligible for admission was gathered here. Everyone had three application chances, and all of the boys had set their first option as the First Men's Military Academy. This was the dream school of all the boys, so even if they knew the chances were slim, they still used up one of their application chances on this school with no regrets.

Qi Long and the others joined the long line of people waiting. However, the line moved swiftly, and very soon it was their turn. Qi Long and his team lifted their right hands, revealing their communicators, and waved them at the A.I. processing the applications for the First Men's Military Academy. A beep was heard, and then the virtual screen displayed their details, along with the honours and results they had obtained in their 10 years at the scout academy.

After each person concerned verified his details, he would press the 'confirm' button of the A.I., and their information would be delivered instantly to the database of the First Men's Military Academy. After that, all they had to do was wait to receive the confirmation notification on their communicators.

Very quickly, the First Men's Military Academy had responded by sending their application numbers to their communicators. At this point, they then had to wait patiently for the communicator notification for the final testing.

After the 5 members of the team had gone through the entire process, they waited for Ling Lan to do the same. However, Ling Lan did not do anything, merely signalling for Qi Long and the rest of the team to move so they would not obstruct the others behind them from applying.

This unexpected action of Ling Lan's confounded Qi Long. He blurted out right then and there, "Boss, why aren't you applying to the First Men's Military Academy?"

"Let's speak at the side, alright?" Qi Long's outburst had made them the centre of attention; Ling Lan was rather resigned by this.

"Ah... that's Ling Lan who withdrew from the academy three years ago." Noticing Ling Lan, everyone began to stir in excitement. The grand armed melee that year had been launched by Ling Lan, and due to that decision, many initially unawakened students had obtained the opportunity to awaken... It could be said that, a large majority of the 7th graders then — that is, the 10th graders now — were extremely grateful towards Ling Lan.

"Our uncrowned king has returned...!" shouted someone in joy, obviously a loyal supporter of Ling Lan.

"Just now I seem to have heard that Ling Lan is not applying for the First Men's Military Academy? Why is that?" Some people had latched onto Qi Long's question, and began to debate the reason behind it in astonishment.

In their eyes, only those Class-A folks would be able to successfully enrol into the First Men's Military Academy without much trouble. As the king of kings in Class-A, if Ling Lan did not enter the First Men's Military Academy, who should?

"Could it be that Ling Lan's injury from back then still hasn't healed?" asked a random student. The cacophony was cut by an abrupt silence, and then the noise exploded, even more chaotic than before. Could that really be true?!

Hearing these speculations, as if thinking of something, Qi Long's face changed.

Seeing the situation slipping out of control, Ling Lan hurriedly signalled for Qi Long and the others to leave the area first. This spot was truly unsuitable for them to talk.

The group quickly left the application point. The assessment time would be sent directly to the applicants' communicators, so it was not necessary to wait at the application point itself. As long as the applicant was not late for the assessment, it was all fine.

The six of them came to a relatively quiet location, and then Ling Lan said, "Actually, choosing not to apply for the First Men's Military Academy is a deeply thought out decision on my part."

"Could it be that your body hasn't healed yet, Boss?" asked Qi Long anxiously. Back then, when the academy doctor had determined that Ling Lan would require 3 to 4 years to fully recover, they had assumed that 3 years would take care of everything for sure. Who knew reality would not turn out this way...

"Yes, I still need one year's time. And this year just happens to be the most critical one... If I don't take care, some latent problems will remain in my body, which may even affect my future career as a mecha operator." Ling Lan did not hesitate to exaggerate. Even if she were as fit as an ox right now, she would still spin it so that she was a ravaged wilting white cabbage.

"You all know that the first year of physical training at the First Men's Military Academy is exceedingly harsh — if one doesn't pass, one will be kicked out from the school directly. My family doctor has clearly diagnosed that my body would not be able to withstand that year of training. Since I already know it is impossible, I can only give up on applying."

Ling Lan naturally wasn't afraid of this so-called harsh physical training. The reason why she would not apply for the First Men's Military Academy is that both her mother, Lan Luofeng, and she were not at all confident that she could keep her gender under wraps for all 6 years at the school.

Just the annual physical check-up alone would be an unfordable natural chasm, not to mention the various forms of physical training they would have to go through. Based on what she knew, there were times when they had to fight stripped to the waist — and this was impossible for Ling Lan!

Of course, even without those issues, it still was not suitable for Ling Lan to enter the First Men's Military Academy, this gathering grounds of abnormal prodigies, with her current situation. Mind you, once she managed to enter that school, she would draw the attention of the entire Federation. And this was precisely what Ling Lan did not need. The best thing for her would be to be utterly forgotten, to fade away into obscurity so she could find a chance to regain her female life.

Lan Luofeng did not want her daughter to live forever in the world as a man; she just could not bear it. Thus, after discussion, the final decision was for Ling Lan to apply to the most remote planet in the galaxy, planet Aureolin ¹.

It was an agricultural planet, with beautiful scenery and temperate weather. Moreover, the college there was rather easygoing — one just needed to muck about for a few years there to obtain a degree. Although Ling Lan felt somewhat regretful for the choice, she did not want to let Lan Luofeng worry, and so agreed.

Of course, Ling Lan did not obediently apply to those horticultural colleges as Lan

Luofeng wished, choosing instead to apply to the only community college specialising in mecha repairs on the planet. Ling Lan had carefully examined that school, and found that although it was known as a mecha service college, it still had a mecha control course. The course only accepted 50 people, but Ling Lan believed that, based on her status as a Class-A student from the Central Scout Academy, that college would definitely not reject her.

When Qi Long and the other 4 members heard about Ling Lan's situation, their mood instantly dropped.

Han Jijyun could not help but ask, "Then, which military school are you applying to?" The other military schools were perhaps not as strict as the First Men's Military Academy.

"I've prepared to apply to the Windchase Mecha Service College on planet Aureolin." The youths were gobsmacked once more by Ling Lan's reply.

"Servicing mecha? Boss, are you joking?" Qi Long leapt up in shock, his face filled with disbelief.

He had never forgotten Ling Lan's formidable control skills — while in the virtual world, he had piloted a mecha and simulated a fight with the figure of the Twilight mecha that day in his mind, and he had lost spectacularly. This gave Qi Long a clearer idea of Ling Lan's true control ability. For such a prodigious mecha operator to go become a regular skilled technician and service mecha... he felt that his entire world was being upended.

Ling Lan cut off Qi Long with a cold glare, "The Mecha Service College does not just have mecha servicing courses, it also has a mecha control course."

These words finally let the team members' spirits return to their bodies — Boss wasn't going to go become a mecha repairman! — they felt they had been revived.

"Is the mecha control class of that planet any good?" asked Han Jijyun dubiously.

However, Ling Lan's response to that let them finally understand why their Boss Lan had chosen that school. "It's so-so. But that planet is the most suitable for resting and recuperating. The weather is mild, the scenery beautiful, and the air quality is the most optimum A+ grade. My family doctor has said that my body will be able to relax best there, and will be able to eliminate all latent problems. Plus, the school is very

easygoing, working on a credit-based system. For the first year, I plan to rest at home and just work on some theory classes. I will put the actual control classes in the second year..." said Ling Lan, her expression turning helpless at this point, "Only that school allows me to freely arrange my time, so that place is the most suitable for me..."

Ling Lan found that she was really good at lying — she herself was almost taken in by her own lies.

Seeing the five still in low spirits before her, Ling Lan added, "Besides, just because I've gone there doesn't mean I won't ever come back. The First Men's Military Academy has transfer opportunities every year. Promising students at other schools can still reapply for the First Men's Military Academy through testing. Once my body recovers, I will be back."

First comfort them for now, there will be some excuse to explain things later on... Ling Lan decided to take things one step at a time and cross bridges when she came upon them. Right now, she needed to pump Qi Long and the others up for their application test into the First Men's Military Academy. Mind you, only at the First Men's Military Academy would they receive the best support for their development. She definitely would not allow their futures to be negatively impacted because of her.

Sure enough, Ling Lan's words caused Qi Long and the others to rally immediately. It was true when they thought about it! So Boss Lan wouldn't be applying for the First Men's Military Academy now, but that doesn't mean he won't be able to enrol later on. There would still be chances, and although those chances would be much more difficult than applying now, who was Ling Lan? He was their boss! It would be no problem for him!

It had to be said that Qi Long and the others really had a kind of blind faith in Ling Lan. In their minds, as long as it was something Boss Lan wanted to do, nothing was impossible.

Chapter 189

The Flames of War Rise Again!

Just like that, Qi Long and the others went off in high spirits to take the test for the First Men's Military Academy. Meanwhile, Ling Lan went to the application point of the school she had chosen. There was no one there; almost none of the Central Scout Academy students would choose to apply to the colleges here.

Here were the most backward vocational colleges and community colleges, and the application for these institutes were all processed by just one A.I... Frankly, the Central Scout Academy did not want their students to apply to these schools at all — if not for the Federation's regulations for fairness and equal opportunity, the Central Scout Academy would definitely have driven these schools out of its assessment centre without giving them any chance.

Ling Lan deftly chose the course she wanted to apply for, and very quickly, the Windchase Mecha Service College had approved her application request. Soon after, Ling Lan received the other's reply on her communicator.

Opening it to read, Ling Lan blinked blankly. Two large words — 'TEST EXEMPTED' — came into sight. The other party had actually exempted her from the application tests completely. It was clear to see how shocked and pleased the school was by her application. They were very afraid that this was an impulsive decision on Ling Lan's part, and so did not want to give Ling Lan any time to reconsider.

It was of course a good thing to be exempted from testing; Ling Lan decisively pressed the confirmation button. With her confirmation, her data file was sent straight to the Windchase Mecha Service College... That done, Ling Lan immediately rushed back to the application point of the First Men's Military Academy, to wait for the final assessment results of Qi Long and the others.

Meanwhile, at this exact moment, at a distant Federation border, on a battlefield between the Twilight Empire and the Federation, another round of conventional warfare officially began.

On the battlefield, the starships of both sides faced off from a distance. Countless intermediate and advanced mecha were being ejected from the starships' ports, almost filling up the entire starry sky. Ten of thousands of mecha engines roared in unison, the sound threatening to rip the starry skies apart.

The mecha of the two nations formed team after team, breaking off to engage their own group of opponents. Ever since technology had advanced enough to make galactic war possible, mecha battles had become the most basic type of combat, sometimes to the point where the final outcome of a war would be determined based on the power of each side's mecha operators. This was also why all nations invested so much in the cultivation of mecha operators — they were the main fighting force, the strongest solo weapons for the purpose of domination and conquest.

Every war was fierce and brutal. Whenever war broke out, great numbers of mecha operators would fall, which was why mecha operators had the highest casualty rate among soldiers. Even so, every soldier of the Federation still wanted to be a mecha operator as their first choice, because only mecha operators could truly control their own lives, as long as they were strong enough.

This was just a conventional battle, but even so, countless mecha operators had already been lost to these starry skies. Those final flares as they fell were like radiant fireworks, lighting up the entire starry skies, leaving behind its owner's final requiem.

On the main command ship in the middle of the Federation fleet, everyone in the command centre was looking at the battlefield before them with serious expressions. They were waiting patiently for the final outcome of the mecha battle — at that time, this clash would be over.

It wasn't that they did not want to arrange any tactics or stratagems to reduce the number of casualties... it was just that this had become routine. This kind of conventional battle, against a long-standing enemy across many years — they had become familiar with each other's tactics. After all this protracted fighting, what mattered in the end was the overall strength of the two nations, as well as which nation had the stronger mecha.

"There is strange movement on the left side of the opponent's fleet!" Right then, a report rang out in the command centre from a surveillance soldier responsible for monitoring the area.

"Zoom in!" The supreme commander of the Federal Border Protection Fleet, Major General Tang Xu, who had been stationed here for 6 years, gave an immediate command after hearing the report. Tang Xu was 43 years old this year, and was considered one of the few outstanding and authoritative Major Generals in the Federation now. Due to his tenacity, he had ensured the stability of the situation at the Federation's border for several years.

At his command, the large screen in the command centre rapidly zoomed in on the position in question. They then saw black mecha being silently ejected one after another from the opponent starship's launching ports.

The surveillance soldier manipulating the image knew very clearly what was important. He immediately provided a close-up of one of the black mecha, especially focusing in of the arm area and enlarging it. At the sight of the serial number beginning with an 'S', the command centre was instantly in an uproar. There were even several senior officers who couldn't help but burst into foul language.

"Twilight actually sent their special ace mecha squad out!" All the Twilight ace mecha were basically marked with XSYZ serial numbers. Z marked the strongest squads of ace mecha, while X marked the weakest. The strength of the ace mecha of the Twilight Empire was equal to that of the Federation's ace mecha. Of course, the Federation's ace mecha squads were also differentiated by their strength. In any case, the S-series special ace mecha squad deployed by the opponent could be considered an extremely powerful veteran mecha team of the Twilight Empire.

Tang Xu knew the situation gave him no time to hesitate. He immediately ordered, "Order the Soaring Dragon ace mecha squad to attack!"

Each fleet would have one ace mecha squad to hold the fort. They were the top fighting power of the Federation — if it were not absolutely necessary, he really did not want to send them out. Just the very idea of losing one of the operators made his heart ache terribly. However, even more, he just could not allow common mecha operators to lose their lives needlessly in engaging the opponent's ace mecha operators. Ace level enemies required aces to match.

At the right flank of the fleet, an interstellar mothership was hovering, quiet but somewhat forbidding. In its belly, a primed and fully-equipped mecha squad was

waiting to be deployed. It was the trump card ace mecha squad of this protection fleet —— the Soaring Dragons!

At this moment, they were sitting in their respective mecha with solemn expressions. They were spread out in their respective launch passages, paying close attention to the progress of the battle before them.

Suddenly, the call to combat rang out through the entire mothership. The sharp sound pierced through the initial silence, and all the ace operators instinctively clenched the control sticks in their hands. This sound meant that their turn to battle was about to begin.

They had already been waiting for too long. Every time a battle began, they would always be ready to move out, but in the end, they had never had a chance to see the battlefield. Holding fast to the order from the command centre to wait and be on standby at every battle... if it were not for the military culture deep within their very marrows, the multiple occurrences of cry wolf¹ would very easily tire them out and cause them to become lax in carrying out their orders.

However, all the ace operators knew well that since they were being deployed now, it meant that the enemy would most certainly be ace operators of the same level. This would be a cruel battle to the death — both sides would use their lives to prove who the true kings were!

"Orders. Ace mecha squad Soaring Dragon to strike. Direction southwest, coordinates 1245, 2340!" Every operator of the Soaring Dragons heard this command from the command centre on their mecha's public channel.

"8001, 8002, 8003, 8004, 8005, all prepped and ready to go. Calling JMC801, requesting deployment!" From each launch port, deployment requests were transmitted from the ace operators to the headset of the JMC responsible for guiding the ace mecha.

"Checking... All equipment in order, mobility normal. Launch approved. 3, 2, 1... launching!" The JMC specially in charge of the ace mecha approved the launch requests after swiftly running through the prerequisite checks.

"Fire!" "Fire!" "Fire!" Consecutive sounds of ejections rang out. From the 5 launch ports on both sides of the mothership, the prepped ace mecha were shot out into the

skies.

"8011, 8012, 8013... requesting deployment!"

"8021, 8022, 8023... requesting deployment!"

Batch after batch of ordered ace mecha were shot into the skies... at this moment, the exclusive communications channels of each mecha were extremely busy. A mecha battle involving large battalions was not conducted in solo fights; the mecha needed to group together in units to engage the enemy.

"8011 calling 8001. Wingman One requesting to enter formation..."

"8021 calling 8001. Wingman Two requesting to enter formation..."

In this manner, every time a formation was fully formed, the mecha would then move swiftly to the coordinates the command centre sends them.

"Baka, how does the opponent move so fast?" The commander on the Twilight's mainship, a general with a thin moustache on his upper lip and grey sideburns, saw team after team of silver-white mecha flying from the opponent's backend, swiftly intercepting their ace mecha which had already gotten into formation, and couldn't help but swear angrily.

"General, believe that our mecha operators will not lose to those chinks," said a young staff officer with a slight bow, but his tone was haughty. It should be known that their S-series special ace mecha squads were called the 'victory mecha which would never fall' ² — dealing with these small guppies would definitely be no problem.

"Aoki, don't underestimate them. The Chinese Federation has always been our archenemy. For thousands of years, as long as war breaks out, it has always been the end of their lives or ours. Throughout history, we have suffered defeat many times because we underestimated them, bringing great losses to our empire. We must learn from these lessons." The general was a cautious person. He was not blindly confident like some people within the country, self-assured in their belief that the Chinese Federation was just a pretty flower vase ³.

"General, what you say makes sense. But, the Chinese Federation now is no longer the

Federation of before. 16 years ago, even their god-class operator Ling Xiao lost his life at our warriors' hands. Now, they are just in their death struggle. Victory will forever belong to the Great Twilight Empire." Staff Officer Aoki's face was filled with pride. The successful assassination of Ling Xiao was the glory of every Twilight soldier.

As soldiers of the new generation of the Twilight Empire, they had grown up under the propaganda of the empire's successful killing of the Chinese Federation's strongest god-class operator Ling Xiao. In their world view, the Chinese Federation was already on the wane, no longer having the strength to resist them. The Great Twilight Empire would definitely obtain the final victory and eventually take over the entire Chinese Federation.

"Is that really so?" The general's expression was grim as he stared at the large screen. He did not believe that the Chinese Federation really had no backup resources. What's more, they still had other god-class operators. Even though those people had remained reclusive all this time, if the Chinese Federation truly was pushed to the brink of no return, these fearsome beings would probably appear one after another. In contrast, their empire only had nine mecha god-kings ⁴— they just could not match up in numbers.

"We need to drag them along for another period of time. The oldest god-class operator of the Federation must be nearing 200 years old by now..." The general calculated in his heart. As long as one or two of the opponent's god-class operators died, then in any top-level contest of strength, their Empire would not be at a disadvantage. At that time, it would truly be the time for their Great Twilight Empire to push their attack.

Chapter 190

The Mysterious Mecha in the Black Hole!

"Aoki, notify the special ace operator squad. Let them use all their might to kill the opponent's ace operators!" The general gave a decisive order. Since a stealth attack was already out of the question, then they might as well eliminate a part of the other's ace operators to weaken the enemy's combat power.

"Hai!" Aoki accepted the general's order with a respectful bow, the pride on his face fading. After that, he turned around and passed on the order to the mecha operators currently facing the opponent's ace operators.

Meanwhile, that batch of deployed Soaring Dragon ace mecha had already began clashing with the enemy — the curtains were lifted on a scene of brutal fighting.

While the command centres of both sides patiently watched the progress of the ace operator fight, at the heart of the flames of battle, an invisible energy was forming.

On the Federation's command ship, a soldier monitoring the battlefield suddenly cried out in shock.

The other soldiers beside him were startled and quickly asked, "What happened?"

"Look here, what is that?" The soldier zoomed in on the oddity he had seen. Right at the centre point of the fighting, a black dot had appeared unexpectedly.

The soldier was really bothered by the black dot, finding it rather creepy and frightening. He magnified the image of the dot as far as he could, and finally, they could clearly see that, at the centre of the black dot, there seemed to be some energy swirling backwards. Even stranger was the fact that the black dot was expanding at a rapid pace.

"Could this be... a black hole!" This bone-chilling reverse airflow phenomenon sparked some memory in the soldier's mind, and he could not help but blurt out his conclusion.

"What happened?" The senior captain in charge of the surveillance room rushed over when he heard the commotion.

"Sir, it's a black hole! A black hole has appeared at the heart of battle. Order the fighters to retreat quickly!" The soldier's face was pale with fright. Black holes were the ender of all things... once swallowed by a black hole, no one could escape from within it. Therefore, the moment the emergence of a black hole was discovered, even if they were in the middle of a battle, both sides would mutually choose to stop fighting and escape together.

By now, the captain could clearly see the black dot the soldier had enlarged on the screen as well. In just this short period of time since the soldier had first discovered it, the dot had expanded from its initial size of a tiny fingertip to a round hole of about 20 to 30 centimetres in diameter. The black hole was spreading at a rapid pace — it was foreseeable that, in short order, it would become a supersized hole capable of swallowing everything. At that time, no one here would be able to escape from its clutches.

The captain knew the situation was dire. He swiftly leapt at his optical supercomputer, and activated the computer's wartime emergency protocol! Of course, this protocol could not be activated simply. If any abuse of power was discovered, the person in question would definitely be court-martialled.

"Wartime emergency protocol activated successfully. Please choose the required option!" The A.I. inquired coldly.

"Open all military channels. I want to broadcast a wide scale announcement!" Even the short time taken to activate the supercomputer caused the captain's forehead and bridge of his nose to drip with sweat. A black hole was truly too frightening; he was afraid there would not be enough time.

"Connecting to all military channels, successful!" When the A.I. reported this, the captain immediately pressed the voice button for the broadcast. "Emergency notification for all troops. At the centre of the battle, a black hole is forming! All mecha operators are to retreat immediately, all mecha operators are to retreat immediately!"

"I repeat. Emergency notification for all troops. At the centre of the battle, a black hole is forming! All mecha operators are to retreat immediately, all mecha operators are to retreat immediately!"

This abrupt military-wide broadcast caused an uproar among the Federation fighters. At this time, the command centre had already received the images of the black hole transmitted by the surveillance room. Without even having to think about it, the supreme commander immediately ordered all the starship carriers to send out the retreat signal to the mecha troops they housed.

In the meantime, the black hole at the centre of the fighting had already expanded into a dark chasm of 3 to 4 metres wide. The suction of energy was already extremely obvious now, especially for the ace operators closest to the black hole. They quickly halted their fighting and stared fearfully at the black hole as it grew larger and larger, its suction power becoming stronger and stronger.

Everyone knew what a black hole represented. It was the root of calamity, death, and the destruction of all things.

"It's a black hole, retreat quickly!" Such an obvious black hole made the Twilight Empire mecha operators retreat swiftly even before their own starships could send out the signal to retreat.

At this time, all the mecha operators of both nations no longer had any desire to continue fighting. All the mecha flew swiftly back to their own starships, afraid that if they were any slower, they would be consumed by the black hole.

But they were still too slow in the end. The black hole, which had already expanded to about 10 metres wide, suddenly burst open! As if being pried open by some force, the black hole abruptly became a gigantic black hole of over 100 metres wide. The innermost layer of mecha were instantly caught in the suction of the black hole.

"Godd*mmit, increase horsepower, operate engines at 120%!" The innermost layer of mecha could already feel the growing suction. Some of the operators reacted very quickly, decisively powering their engines to the max to try and escape the suction range. Operating the engines at 120% could not be maintained for long — doing this for too long would leave lasting damage to the main engine. Mecha operators who loved their mecha typically would not bear to do so.

This group of quick-thinking mecha operators were considered lucky. Although they had to pay the cost of breaking their engines, they still managed to at least charge out from the suction range of the black hole, salvaging their lives. In contrast, many more mecha operators lost their chance at survival due to their slow reflexes. They were

instantly pulled in by the suction... by the time they thought to push their engines to the max, it was much too late.

Under this fearsome extra-terrestrial force of nature, even the formidable and dominant ace operators were like infants, unable to resist.

Although most of the ace operators had managed to escape from the suction range of the black hole due to their superior reflexes, because the black hole had appeared right in the middle where the ace operators had been fighting, there were still quite a number of ace operators who had been ruthlessly devoured.

Facing this situation, the operators of both nations could only stare helplessly as those mecha were consumed by the black hole. There were also quite a few mecha who, before they could be fully sucked into the black hole, had directly exploded due to the battering of the chaotic turbulence, turning into countless shards of debris...

"8217, hold on!" One of the ace mecha formations of the Federation was in a similar crisis. The main mecha 8207 had reacted quickly, almost escaping from the danger zone. As long as his mecha did not break down, escaping with his life was no problem.

However, 10 metres behind him, wingman mecha 8217 was not as lucky as 8207. He was still within range of the powerful suction of the black hole, and most critically, one of his two secondary engines had exploded due to overload. This decreased his speed by a good chunk, and his crisis was precisely due to this significant loss of speed.

The suction of the black hole grabbed hold of him — due to its great power, 8217 actually began sliding backwards. This meant that his mecha's engines were already running out of power to fight this powerful suction.

As the main mecha of 8217, the leader of the formation, seeing his own wingman 8217 in such grave danger, did not even stop to think about it. He immediately controlled his mecha to grab hold of the other's right arm.

"Leader!" Seeing his leader reach out to help him at this most perilous moment with no concern for his own well-being, 8217's eyes turned red with emotion. He desperately commanded his A.I. to increase the output of his engines, hoping to borrow his leader's extra pulling force to escape death.

They were frozen like this for 30 seconds. When the wingman saw the other secondary engine of his mecha blow up due to overload as well, he knew that it was hopeless.

"Don't give up!" Even though he knew that the chances of the two of them escaping together were minuscule, 8207 still did not let go.

"Leader, let go of me!" 8217 said through gritted teeth. He could not drag his leader with him into death.

"No, 8227 has already been sacrificed. I will not watch as my final brother dies!" 8207 refused firmly.

It was already the end of the line, but 8207 still would not let go — he only kept repeating, don't give up! 8217's tears began to fall, "Leader, let go quickly... do you really want to die with me?"

"If all my brothers are dead, then what would be the point of living on my own? We've said before that — if we die together on the battlefields someday, we will be brothers again in the next life. Now, 8227 is already gone. With the two of us too, even if we go to the afterlife, all three of us brothers will be able to be together once again," said 8207 with a smile. Being able to die with one's brothers, was also a type of happiness.

"Leader!" Although tears were still falling from 8217's eyes, 8217 smiled as well. "Thank you for taking care of me all these years. Becoming your number one wingman is my greatest fortune." That said, he reached out his left hand to pull out the beam saber on his back, and then, amidst 8207's shocked cries, he resolutely brought the saber down on his own right arm...

With a "Swoosh!", the mecha's right arm fell. Suddenly losing the weight in his hands, 8207's over-revved engines instantly pulled him out of the range of the black hole's suction.

"8217!" roared 8207 in grief, tears in his fierce eyes. His final brother, using such an intense method to sacrifice himself, saving him...

There was a deep pain in 8207's chest — mindlessly, he leapt towards the black hole, but was held back by formation leader 8102 who had arrived in the nick of time. " 207¹, calm down!"

"They were my brothers!" 8207 finally burst into tears.

"They were my brothers too!" barked 8102 sharply, "You remember this, your life right now is no longer just your own. It is also 217's."

These words caused 8207 to jerk, his initial struggles dying down instantly.

Right at that moment, 8102's wingman 8122 suddenly cried out, "Leader, look, at the heart of the black hole, something is flying out..."

8102 looked over quickly. Indeed, at the centre of the black hole, something was slowly moving out against the black hole's suction. Although its speed was exceedingly slow, it was still slowly but surely getting away from the heart of the black hole. "How is this possible?

Everyone knew that the suction force was definitely the most terrifying at the heart of a black hole — absolutely nothing could stand against it. What in the world was that thing to be able to fight off this type of suction power to slowly escape from within the black hole?

8102 zoomed in on the image of the thing. Sure enough, at the heart of the black hole, a mysterious mecha was making its difficult way forwards, trying to escape the grip of the overwhelming suction of the black hole. The body of that mysterious mecha was marked with clear signs of damage, even looking somewhat dilapidated. Yet, it was precisely this beat-up mysterious mecha that was currently performing a miracle.

Chapter 191

The Fearsome Combat Ability of a God-Class Operator!

However, what he discovered next filled 8102 with great pleasant surprise — the mysterious mecha's left arm was currently holding onto a mecha with a broken arm. That mecha was precisely 8217 who had just chopped off part of his arm and had been swallowed by the black hole.

"Look at the left hand of that mecha... isn't that 8217?" 8102 could not help but ask joyfully. Even though he was sure his eyes were not mistaken, this pleasant surprise made him somewhat doubtful — could the comrade he thought for sure was dead return once more to their side?

8102's question was like a shot of adrenaline to 8207¹. His spirits rallied and he hurriedly operated his mecha's screen to zoom in on the heart of the black hole and immediately shouted, "It's him! It's him! It's 8217!"

"That mecha... don't you all think it looks somewhat familiar?" 8102's number one wingman 8112 had also seen the mecha, but his focus was on the other mecha's form.

"It's a mecha from our Federation. I see the golden five-pointed star on his right arm! That's the exclusive symbol of our Federation!" shouted 8122 as well.

Meanwhile, the mecha at the heart of the black hole continued to fight with all its might against the pull of the black hole. After a period of movement, that mysterious mecha finally moved out of the innermost circle of the black hole's centre. There, perhaps due to the weakened suction, the mysterious mecha began to speed up, its appearance becoming increasingly clearer to the crowd.

The body of the mysterious mecha was larger than ace mecha by a ring, and could even be considered a giant mecha. This type of mecha asked a lot from its operator. The mecha's design was rather simple and unsophisticated, and the scars all over its body only added a sense of weariness to it. All of this proved that this mecha had been through great trials and had suffered great hardship.

Still, despite the mysterious mecha's beat-up body, the personal totem at its chest was surprisingly vibrant. A fiery red phoenix being reborn from the blazing flames beneath it, the fire phoenix about to take flight as if drawing from the energy fed to it by the flames... this totem was extremely familiar to all mecha operators of the Federation at the scene, and this familiarity seemed to come from deep within them...

"Fire phoenix! That's the fire phoenix rising from the ashes!" Someone yelled out within the public military channel.

"It's Ling Xiao — it's Major General Ling Xiao!" As if being woken from a trance, everyone began to shout and exclaim. The totem of the fire phoenix rising from the ashes — only one person in the Federation had that mark. And that was the god-class operator Major General Ling Xiao! Just like the fire phoenix in his totem, Major General Ling Xiao had risen from the ashes of death to return to the Federation!

"That's right, it's Major General Ling Xiao! I've seen that mecha in my textbooks before. It's <Belief> — that is the god-class mecha <Belief>!" There were also some who had recognised that simplistic giant mecha as the legendary god-class mecha <Belief>.

This also explained why this mecha could resist the powerful suction of the black hole at its heart — only a god-class mecha would be capable of such a feat.

On the other side, the Twilight Empire had also identified that giant mecha trying to escape from the heart of the black hole as the god-class machine <Belief> of Ling Xiao who was rumoured to have already been killed by them.

At this sight, within the command ship of the Twilight Empire, Staff Officer Aoki, who had been closely observing the black hole, was stupefied. "How can this be? How can this be? Hasn't Ling Xiao already been killed by our brave warriors? Why is he still alive, suddenly emerging from inside the black hole?" Aoki could feel his pride crumbling, suddenly being informed that the source of his confidence was all a lie. Right then, he just could not accept it. "No, this definitely cannot be real. I must be seeing an illusion, an illusion!"

"Slap!" Aoki's face was whipped to the side by a forceful slap. The general standing beside him had thrown a slap at him to wake him up. "So what if he is alive? It's very easy to let him die!"

The general was a decisive person. He knew that once Ling Xiao returned to the

Chinese Federation, the Chinese Federation's combat power would reach a new unimaginable height. This was something their Twilight Empire could not tolerate.

The general's eyes turned fierce. He swiftly connected to the military-wide channel and gave his orders. "No matter what the cost, kill god-class operator Ling Xiao!"

Following this order, the mecha operators who were still dubious received an answer — that mysterious mecha coming out from the heart of the black hole was indeed Ling Xiao's <Belief>.

"Kill Ling Xiao! Kill Ling Xiao! Kill Ling Xiao! Kill Ling Xiao!" The troops of the Twilight Empire had been educated via brainwashing ². The killing of god-class operator Ling Xiao was one of the great exploits of their country that had been established 16 years ago — they definitely would not allow this honour to be overturned. All the Twilight Empire mecha operators piloted their mecha to approach the black hole. They raised the beam guns in their hands, shooting fervently towards the heart of the black hole.

"D*mmit, they're trying to kill our Major General Ling Xiao!" The despicable actions ³ of the Twilight Empire infuriated the Federation soldiers who were anxiously waiting for Ling Xiao to escape from danger.

"Protect Major General Ling Xiao!" When Major General Tang Xu saw this, he could not help but bellow into the communications channel.

Ling Xiao was their Federation's ultimate weapon, one of their guardian deities — they definitely could not let any harm come to him here.

"Protect Major General Ling Xiao!"

"Protect Major General Ling Xiao!"

"Protect Major General Ling Xiao!"

Following roar after angry roar, all the Federation soldiers raised the weapons in their hands and began to intercept the enemy's attacks. Many of the mecha operators even leapt to the fringes of the black hole, to form a tight mecha defensive wall, using the bodies of their own mecha to bear the brunt of the enemy's beam fire.

They knew very well that doing so may cost them their lives, but they were unafraid. This was because they were doing this to protect their national military idol, the god-

class operator —— Major General Ling Xiao ⁴.

And so, after every beam attack, there would always be a mecha or two from the Federation mecha defensive wall which exploded as it went beyond its damage threshold. At that time, a new mecha would step up to take its place, once again blocking off the beam fire.

Of course, the Twilight Empire's mecha operators were not having a good time of it either. The Federation mecha operators fought back just as fiercely, beam fire roaring out from both sides at about the same intensity. This battle had become a standing showdown. The mecha operators were no longer mecha operators — they no longer flew around nimbly, and there were no more complex attack manoeuvres. The two sides just shot at each other mechanically like fixed wooden puppets.

It should be said that this battle was a mecha fight without any strategy. Countless mecha operator lives were lost on both sides, and it was all for the sake of one person — the one currently struggling to get away from the suction of the black hole, Ling Xiao.

The Federation mecha operators did not know how many attacks they blocked off, nor did they know how much time had passed. But finally, they heard a cheer ring out in the general comms channel, "Major General Ling Xiao has successfully escaped the black hole!"

When they heard this news, all the Federation mecha operators swelled with joy and triumph, feeling that it would have been worth it even if they had died.

Subsequently, an extremely gentle voice rang out across the channel, "Many thanks for your protection, brothers." This voice made everyone unbelievably emotional, also bringing tears to Major General Tang Xu's eyes. This familiar voice was precisely that of Ling Xiao who had 'died' 17 years ago.

Ling Xiao handed over 8217 to a mecha operator of the Federation, then controlled <Belief> to fly upwards to hover above the Federation mecha.

"Activate Divine Punishment system!" said Ling Xiao calmly.

"Command received by <Belief>, Divine Punishment activated!" <Belief> and Ling Xiao's rapport was already at an extreme — not even a second later, twelve wings suddenly sprouted from <Belief>'s back, and then, the wings began to absorb energy

rapidly till a pinnacle of potential.

Next, Ling Xiao controlled <Belief> to aim the twelve wings in twelve directions, pointing at the Twilight mecha horde in the distance.

Ling Xiao decisively pressed his trigger, and twelve powerful beams swept out at the Twilight mecha horde ahead, causing the entire starry sky to become a sheet of light in an instant. The Federation mecha operators found themselves temporarily blinded by the intense light.

When the twelve beams faded away and the crowd's vision was restored, they found to their shock that twelve empty lines had been carved into the Twilight mecha horde. The mecha which had been in those lines previously had all vanished, and even more terrifying was the fact that there was no remaining trace of any of them.

What attack was this? It was way too horrifying! Everyone's gazes were drawn towards Ling Xiao's mecha. Only then did they notice that Ling Xiao's <Belief> had already shifted in appearance. On the mecha's back were twelve wings, so perfect that they enchanted the hearts of all observers, giving others the impression that an angel had descended.

Pure white light was currently accumulating at the tip of each wing, which slowly grew brighter and brighter, almost searing the eyes of anyone who stared at them. Additionally, an immense energy was beginning to emanate from those wing-tips...

Right then, the twelve wings changed directions simultaneously, still pointed at the Twilight mecha horde, but in twelve new directions this time.

Soon, twelve beams fired out once more, and when the light faded, twelve new vacant rows were left among the enemy horde.

Just two simple beam attacks had obliterated approximately 2000 mecha of the Twilight Empire. Although the majority of these had been intermediate to advanced mecha, there had still been quite a few ace mecha among them. Regardless of mecha type, against this fearsome attack, they were all completely helpless.

"Baka, Ling Xiao must die!" Seeing the horrific results of Ling Xiao's blasts, the general was reinforced in his belief that Ling Xiao could not be allowed to live. Otherwise, it would be a devastating blow to their Twilight Empire. "All starship cannons to aim at Ling Xiao! Fire, fire with all you have! We must kill off Ling Xiao!"

The general knew well that even if all of them died here today, as long as they succeeded in killing off Ling Xiao, everything would be worth it. For the Empire, all sacrifices were worth it.

"Not good, the enemy is planning to go for broke ⁵." The enemy starship fleet's strange movements were naturally picked up by the Federation's command centre. They were somewhat flustered — it should be known that the power of a starship's main cannon was extremely horrifying. Even the sturdiest interstellar mothership would not be able to withstand more than 3 to 5 attacks from a starship's main cannons.

Chapter 192

The First Marshal!

"Push forwards! Intercept the starships, do not give them any chance to fire their main cannons!" roared Major General Tang Xu in the comms channel. At this point, they could only fight it out. If things became truly dire, blocking off the cannonfire with one of their starships would also be worth it. Following this order, all the Federation starships began to move. Unfortunately, the starships were too large and clumsy — it was not that easy to turn their bodies.

This was also why starships, despite having powerful main cannons, could not be the main fighting force in an interstellar battle. In contrast to the agile mecha, the heavy and slow bulky starships were not at all suited for quick battles, completely toyed with by mecha. If not for the fact that starships themselves were bulked up with great defences and the damage of mecha attacks were insignificant against their bulk, incapable of finishing them off, starships may likely have to quit appearing in battle completely.

"Lock onto Ling Xiao, and fire!" The main cannon of the first starship finally had its sights on Ling Xiao, and so the starship's main cannoneer was charged to attack Ling Xiao, who was hovering in place in the air.

A deafening "Boom!" — the main cannon's fire hit Ling Xiao's mecha directly. Smoke and fire shot out in all directions, completely engulfing <Belief>.

The starship's main cannoneer leapt up and danced in excitement, hollering, "I've hit him! I've hit him!" If Ling Xiao were to die at his hands, he would become the hero of the Twilight Empire!

The smoke cleared and the flames vanished! When Ling Xiao's mecha <Belief> appeared perfectly unharmed before the crowd once more, the dancing cannoneer froze, and his excited words became lodged in his throat as if his neck were being strangled. His face was the picture of disbelief. This was because the massive firepower of the main cannon had actually been unable to leave any mark at all on Ling Xiao's mecha <Belief>.

The Federation soldiers were as equally mystified, unsure how Ling Xiao's *<Belief>* had managed to come out of such powerful cannon-fire utterly unscathed. Some sharp-sighted people then noticed the faint sheen of multi-coloured light on *<Belief>*'s outer shell, and immediately understood. "Divine Shield! It's the god-class mecha's exclusive Divine Shield system!"

The reason why god-class mecha could become god-class mecha was that the A.I. of the mecha could support several systems which regular mecha A.I.s could not. One of these was the Divine Shield system — it could convert energy into an almost flawless, practically invincible divine light shield. It could be said that any weapon invented by humankind at the moment was incapable of breaking through Ling Xiao's defences. Of course, the Divine Shield system was not without weaknesses. It drained too much energy — even a god-class mecha's supposedly endless power could only sustain the system for a short 3 minutes.

Ling Xiao's mecha *<Belief>* withstood the main cannon's attack this time but did not continue to remain stationary to be a sitting target. The air around the mecha suddenly warped, and in the very next second, it had appeared by the other's starship.

"The Divine Wind system!" This was yet another of the god-class mecha's exclusive systems. Once it was activated, the mecha could reach up to 4 times the speed of light, truly achieving instantaneous teleportation.

Right then, Ling Xiao, who had already appeared beside the starship, swiftly removed a giant sword hilt from his back. His mecha gripped the sword hilt tightly in its right hand, and a 100-metre long beam saber abruptly appeared out of nowhere in this starry space.

Ling Xiao gripped this giant saber tightly and then swung it down powerfully in a great arc at the starship...

A lift of his hand, a swing of his saber — Ling Xiao did not look again at the starship, keeping away his giant beam saber instantly after his attack to hang it once more behind his back.

And then, the air around *<Belief>* warped again and it reappeared within the enemy mecha horde.

Just at that moment, that starship suddenly split apart. Due to the unexpected

explosion, the people inside it were thrown into space, officially becoming space trash and dying instantly.

Ling Xiao's killing spree did not end there — like a wolf charging into a flock of sheep, Ling Xiao flew among the enemy mecha horde. At this time, two short swords had appeared in his hands. They were the most basic of mecha equipment, high-frequency blades. Still, just these two most basic of weapons sliced through the opponent's mecha as easily as cutting right through a watermelon. The speed of the Divine Wind system, paired with god-class control and unearthly footwork, caused the mecha to flicker in and out of sight. In the blink of an eye, Ling Xiao had destroyed several tens of mecha, among them quite a significant number of ace mecha.

At this moment, everyone understood why it was said in the human world that god-class operators could dictate the outcome of war — there was just no one who could withstand a god-class operator's attack, nor were there any weapons capable of penetrating the other's defence. Only by relying on forces of nature, such as black holes (this should be eliminated now), or explosions of primordial magnetic energy¹ (this was questionable), or consecutive supernovas (almost impossible to happen), or the butcher's knife of time (pretty much the most helpless waiting game), etcetera etcetera... perhaps those might have the possibility of finishing them off².

Seeing this scene, the Twilight Empire general knew that he would certainly be unable to achieve his objective today. Even if they sacrificed every single person on their side, they would still be unable to kill Ling Xiao here. Seeing that the situation was hopeless, he decisively ordered their retreat. He needed to report the news that Ling Xiao still lived post-haste to the Empire's military headquarters.

The Twilight Empire fleet retreated swiftly, very quickly disappearing without a trace. Seeing their opponents scurry off with their tails between their legs back to their own space border, all the Federation warriors cheered! They were cheering for the triumph of this battle, as well as cheering for the return of the god-class operator Ling Xiao.

"Federation 7th Division vice commander, Ling Xiao, requesting provisional docking from an allied starship!" Ling Xiao connected to the general military channel and submitted a docking request.

Tang Xu breathed in deeply, suppressing the elation in his heart as he pressed the button to communicate. "I, Tang Xu, the commander of the First Defence Fleet of the Western Border Guard, permit Major General Ling Xiao to dock on my ship." Following

that declaration, the command ship began transmitting a guidance signal.

Ling Xiao operated his mecha to slowly descend onto the starship's navigation frame. Sliding along the frame, he slid swiftly into the interior of the starship.

Ling Xiao's control was extremely precise, accurately stopping right at the stop-line. At this moment, a sweet and gentle voice rang out in the mecha comms channel. "Major General Ling Xiao, hello! I am the JMC guiding your mecha into the hangar this time. Please follow my instructions to carry out the following movements."

"Roger!" Somewhat familiar, the sweet and pretty voice caused Ling Xiao to zone out for a moment before regaining his awareness. That voice had called up his memories of Lan Luofeng — back then at the start, she had been his exclusive JMC. He had not seen her for almost a full 17 years... he wondered how she was doing now. And there was still their child Ling Lan... a swell of fear and uncertainty actually rose up in Ling Xiao's heart, his heart beginning to pound. He was homesick, yet he feared the reception he would receive when he returned.

Under the JMC's lead, Ling Xiao piloted his mecha accurately into the frame, and then leaving it to the operation of the starship's systems, his mecha was brought straight into the command ship's mecha hold.

Ling Xiao turned off his mecha and opened the cockpit door. At this time, the entire mecha hold had already become filled with the soldiers of the command ship, both men and women. They all wanted to take the opportunity to catch a glimpse of Major General Ling Xiao in person — he was a heroic figure from legend who had been believed dead for 17 years, after all.

Ling Xiao had long become used to this type of gazes. He had always been an elite among the elites, an aberrant prodigy, idolised by people wherever he went. Although he had been away from the Federation for 17 years, he was not at all unfamiliar with this sort of gawking.

A lift carried Ling Xiao to the ground. His original mecha suit had already become worn and tattered, but even so, it did not detract from his looks. A warm and elegant smile on an unbelievably handsome face — all the female soldiers' were blushing as their hearts throbbed. They wished they could just rush forward and hug him, leaving a beautiful memory for themselves.

But these were all just fantasies; they would never dare to act so impudently. Although Major General Ling Xiao looked exceedingly gentle and mild-mannered, just like a humble gentleman, there was just some mystical force about him that stayed their restlessness, discouraging them from going too far.

"Major General Ling Xiao, welcome back!" Tang Xu had already hurried to the mecha hold by this time. Seeing Ling Xiao land, he rushed forwards and clasped Ling Xiao's hands in his, face filled with elation as he greeted Ling Xiao.

The two men had met a few times 17 years ago and had shared a brief conversation, but following Ling Xiao's unfortunate 'demise', their budding relationship had been ended abruptly. Back then, Tang Xu had deeply lamented the loss of a like-minded brother-in-arms.

"Major General Tang Xu, long time no see!" Before greeting Tang Xu, Ling Xiao had peeked at the other's epaulette ³, thus finding out the other's current military rank. 17 years were enough for many of his friends to change military ranks. He wondered if the same could be said for his enemies... a trace of killing intent flashed through Ling Xiao's eyes.

Although Tang Xu really wanted to say something to Ling Xiao, he just could not find any words. He could only shake Ling Xiao's hands solemnly, even though he knew that it was actually more appropriate for them to interact via military salutes.

Ling Xiao swept his gaze around at the surrounding people and smiled wearily, "If possible, please prepare somewhere for me to rest first. I have lived in that damnable black hole for a really long time. I'm physically and mentally worn out."

At the reminder, Tang Xu hurriedly nodded and said, "Done. I'll prepare things immediately!" Ling Xiao's fatigued state proved that his struggle out of the black hole was definitely not as simple and easy as it had seemed to them. He must have paid an extremely steep price in the process.

Just like that, Ling Xiao temporarily settled in with the First Defence Fleet of the Western Border Guard, to rest and recuperate. On the other hand, due to technical issues and a lack of appropriate materials, the mecha <Belief> could not be serviced. It would have to wait till Ling Xiao returned to Doha to receive proper care and maintenance.

Meanwhile, at this very moment, Ling Lan, who had already found out that Qi Long and the other five had all passed and been accepted into the First Men's Military Academy, did not know that a man who would change the future course of her life was on his way home...

One week later, the Federation's first marshal secretly arrived at the headquarters of the First Division. A staff officer by his side informed him that the guest was waiting for him in the living room.

The moment the marshal entered the living room, he saw a man sitting primly on the sofa. The man was about 27 to 28 years old, or maybe even around 30, and on his handsome face was an indistinct trace of a smile, naturally drawing the favour of others. However, because he was dressed from head to toe in brand new martial attire, the trim and almost pressed-creaseless general's uniform made him look sharp and dashing. This lessened his original gentle air somewhat, giving him a rare share of stateliness.

"Ling Xiao, you still live! This is wonderful!" said the marshal emotionally the moment he saw the other, his footsteps speeding up subconsciously.

Seeing that the marshal was here, Ling Xiao immediately stood up at attention and gave the other a proper military salute. "Marshal, long time no see!"

Chapter 193

Ling Xiao's Request!

"Yes, it's really been a long time, almost a full 17 years!" said the marshal with a face filled with nostalgia. Ling Xiao had been the abnormally talented prodigy he had singled out by name for cultivation, and had once been his pride and joy. Back when he had heard of his demise, the marshal had been filled with unimaginable grief.

"Ling Xiao, regarding your successful return this time, headquarters has promised to call a press conference to announce your return. Also, congratulations on successfully becoming the 9th General of our Federation. This is the honour and status you should rightfully receive!" said the marshal with mixed feelings as he patted Ling Xiao on the shoulder. He then moved to sit in an armchair on one side, signalling for Ling Xiao to sit down as well for a talk.

"Many thanks for the appreciation, Marshal!" said Ling Xiao with a soft smile, taking a seat on the sofa beside him. He did not appear to be smug or arrogant from the rise in his status — this formed a strong contrast with his youthful appearance, causing the marshal to nod in approval inside his heart, increasingly pleased by what he saw.

Ling Xiao's 17 years of trials and suffering were not for nothing; it had caused Ling Xiao's entire demeanour to become much more steady and reliable. He deserved the esteemed rank of general, worthy of trust.

"As for your assignment... the 7th Division has, after all, been rebuilt for over 10 years, so every part of the division is already well-developed, making it unsuitable for large-scale adjustment," said the marshal carefully. He knew well how much the 7th Division meant to Ling Xiao, but times had changed, and now the 7th Division no longer had a place for Ling Xiao.

"How does headquarters want to assign me?" In contrast, Ling Xiao did not seem as concerned as the marshal had feared, merely asking calmly about the intentions of the military headquarters.

"Headquarters is planning to reassign a portion of the troops from each division to build a new 23rd Division. The division will be given drafting priority with the new

batch of soldiers this year, while you, Ling Xiao, shall become the sole commander of the 23rd Division. You may freely choose your deputies from any of the other divisions."

The marshal detailed the plans the military had for him. Since Ling Xiao had become the Federation's 9th great general, it was of course necessary for him to lead his own army. However, all the current army divisions already had their own commanders and, excepting cases of grave error, armies typically would not casually switch their supreme commanders. In the end, military headquarters decided to just establish a new army division and make Ling Xiao responsible for it. In order to appease Ling Xiao, they even proffered some preferential treatment and special privileges.

"This is fine too!" Ling Xiao found this arrangement satisfactory. Although the 7th Division indeed meant something special to him, its meaning was not on the label of the 7th Division, but rather with his comrades-in-arms within that division.

17 years' time was long enough for things to change significantly — although the 7th Division still retained its name, those comrades who had fought with him through thick and thin were already gone. Thus, he actually felt it was fine even if he did not go to the 7th Division.

Still, Ling Xiao would not reveal his true thoughts on the matter. Let those folks in headquarters feel as if they had wronged him — this way, he would be able to make some outrageous requests of them.

"Do you still have any other requirements? As long as it is within my means, I will make sure you get it." Sure enough, as Ling Xiao expected, the marshal was the first to fall for it.

Ling Xiao held a moment of silent contemplation, and then said, "I want to know everything that happened with my wife Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan over these past 17 years. I want to catch up on everything I missed in these last 17 years."

The marshal cast a searching glance at Ling Xiao and sighed. He then indicated for the secret service officer by his side to hand over a pre-prepared document. The moment he found out that Ling Xiao still lived and was on his way back, he had asked for this document to be prepared. Knowing Ling Xiao, he would definitely ask him for this information.

Putting his hands on the document being handed over by the staff officer, a surge of emotion coursed through Ling Xiao's eyes. He took a moment to settle himself, before reaching out to accept the document fully into his hands.

Ling Xiao eagerly opened the file and began by browsing the bits and pieces of Lan Luofeng's life over these past 17 years. As Lan Luofeng had always stayed at home, there wasn't much in terms of content. Ling Xiao very quickly finished reading this part of the file.

When Ling Xiao moved on to the part of the file with Ling Lan's information, he took in a deep breath before continuing. The first thing that caught his eyes was a student photo of Ling Lan at 13 years old. The red of the scout uniform made Ling Lan look majestic and spirited. His little face was fixed in a stony expression, like a stoic and serious mini-adult. Ling Xiao found this aloof and unapproachable appearance of his unbearably adorable.

So this was his son Ling Lan? He was definitely the combination of his and Lan Luofeng's strengths! Ling Xiao instantly became a *Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* dad¹... his child was naturally the best and most exceptional!

In a great mood, he flipped to the next page. The document began to introduce the various things that had happened from Ling Lan's birth onwards. When Ling Xiao read till the part about how the Ling branch family had schemed to usurp Ling Lan's inheritance of his premium military benefits, his gaze turned cold. He had been worried from the start about what troubles these greedy family members could bring to Lan Luofeng and his child... but he had not expected that their appetites would be so voracious, actually thinking of outright robbing his child of what he had left for him. He must teach them a lesson.

Then, seeing how Lan Luofeng used the combined forces of the military and the government to chase the entire Ling family out of Doha, Ling Xiao could not help but smile. He knew it — Lan Luofeng was not as weak as she appeared to be.

However, his good mood soon evaporated. This was because he saw that Ling Lan had suffered an assassination attempt on the way to his first day of school, and not just that, a betrayer had actually emerged from among Ling Lan's loyalists... at this point, Ling Xiao almost exploded from rage. He decided that when he got back, he would thoroughly clean up the Ling family loyalists — he definitely would not allow any danger to remain hidden by Ling Lan's side.

But the following information slowly calmed Ling Xiao's rage. He had mixed feelings when he saw that at every ranking tournament, Ling Lan would always surrender on his own at the final moments. His son was clearly capable of dominating all the other students of his grade, but was just unwilling to stand out, finally becoming the grade's uncrowned king. The path his son had chosen to walk was different from his. He had always shown himself to be strong, always in the limelight, while Ling Lan chose instead to hide his talent. His methods of laying low were just a little terrible — anyone who was paying attention could see right through it ².

The file documented all of Ling Lan's impressive exploits in the scout academy, and especially at the part where Ling Lan successfully initiated the grand armed melee that had been sealed away for 100 years, Ling Xiao was instantly filled with pride! So this was his son Ling Lan!

Ling Xiao's pride and elation stopped there, however. As he read the next part, his face turned pale.

Who could have expected that enemy spies would infiltrate the academy disguised as teachers to try and assassinate Ling Lan during the grand armed melee? Fortunately, Ling Lan was speculated to have been saved by the God-Realm master Mu Shui-qing. But even so, Ling Lan had already received serious injuries, his body almost being destroyed.

"Dammit!" raged Ling Xiao, his fingers clenching. The paper in his hands was instantly crumbled into powder to drift down from the air.

This outburst allowed Ling Xiao to regain his composure. He looked down regretfully at that destroyed piece of paper — crap, there were still some things he hadn't had time to read yet...

Ling Xiao could only skip to the final page, only to find that there was nothing more...

"Marshal, my son Ling Lan was injured severely at 13. What happened after that?" Ling Xiao was anxious to know Ling Lan's current condition, quickly turning to ask the marshal for answers.

Hearing Ling Xiao's question, the marshal knew that Ling Xiao must not have seen the rest of the page he had destroyed. He replied, "Because Ling Lan's wounds were too severe, the specialist doctor prescribed 3 to 4 years of proper rest to heal his body.

During this period of time, he cannot take part in any extreme activity, otherwise it would just exacerbate his wounds, very likely leaving some lasting latent trouble in his body."

Saying this, the marshal felt rather awkward. No matter what, as members of the upper rank of the military who were alumni of the scout academy system, they all had some responsibility for the assassination attempt of Ling Lan within the academy. He signalled his secretary to light a cigarette for him, and then continued to say, "Due to this circumstance, Ling Lan made the decision to withdraw from the academy to recuperate at home for 3 years, and only returned to the scout academy in the final year when it was time to apply and register with the various colleges and universities."

"Does that mean his body is fully recovered now?" Ling Xiao's eyes were hopeful.

The marshal drew a mouthful of smoke and puffed it out in a long breath. "No! According to the latest news, Ling Lan's body was injured too severely, 3 years was not enough for him to recover fully. The doctors have diagnosed that he will need at least another year for the possibility of full recovery."

Ling Xiao's entire face turned frigid. His lips were pressed together in a thin line, while his hands were clenched into two tight fists. Due to the extreme force placed on them, the bones of his fingers actually began to emit cracking noises...

The marshal added, "It was a few days ago when your son Ling Lan applied to the various higher institutions. You should know that the military schools have very strict requirements, especially for the first year when they focus mostly on training up the students' physical bodies. Any student who cannot keep up will be expelled. I don't know which institution Ling Lan will choose in the end, but he probably will not apply for those military schools."

"Can we find out now?" asked Ling Xiao.

The marshal looked at the staff officer, who immediately nodded and said, "Marshal, the information is available for checking now."

Ling Xiao did not turn to look at the staff officer at all, keeping his gaze squarely on the marshal, awaiting his reply.

"What shall I do with you? Still so tenacious!" Ling Xiao's clear telegraphing of his intentions of not leaving until he received an answer caused the marshal to shake his

head helplessly. He could only send off his secret service officer to look up the final results of Ling Lan's applications.

Soon, the staff officer returned. His expression was extremely strange as he peeked at Ling Xiao, and he looked as if he were holding back some words which he would have liked to say to Ling Xiao. Still, he remembered his place, and without saying anything, he passed the new folder in his hands to Ling Xiao.

"What, Ling Lan actually applied to the Windchase Mecha Service College on planet Aureolin? What school is this? Why haven't I heard of it?" Ling Xiao was dumbfounded by the news before his eyes. Even if military schools were out of the picture, there were still plenty of renowned public general universities for Ling Lan to choose from.

"That's a community college, rank-F," explained the staff officer in a small voice. Rank-F institutions were at the lowest tier; almost no other institutions could be worse than that. Back when he had first seen this information, the staff officer had been just as shocked, which was why he had taken the extra effort to look up the relevant details and ranking of the Windchase Mecha Service College.

"Ha, Ling Xiao's son, *my* son, actually falling so far as to enter a rank-F community college... Marshal, I think you owe me an explanation." Ling Xiao had been dealt a heavy blow by this news. Losing his previous respectfulness, his tone was curt and demanding. Some people, some things, were his hot buttons, not to be triggered carelessly. Lan Luofeng was one of them previously, and now Ling Lan was one.

The marshal naturally did not take offense at this. In fact, Ling Xiao would only be so direct with him because he truly considered him as an elder who cared for him. He rubbed at his brow in consternation, unsure what he should do.

When he had first seen his staff officer return with that complicated expression on his face, he had known that something was not right. And sure enough, this was the situation.

"Then, you tell me. What do you want?" He indeed owed Ling Xiao a great deal; the marshal could not refuse him.

"I want my son to enter the Federation's First Men's Military Academy!" Ling Xiao said with steel-like conviction. In his heart, that was the only place that was worthy of his son.

Chapter 194

Terrible Odds?

"Impossible!" The marshal rejected the request without even thinking about it.

The First Men's Military Academy was the central focus of the entire Federation. Any student who managed to be accepted into the school was the Federation's cream of the crop, each and every single one of them sufficiently exceptional on their own merits. From the very establishment of the school, in order to preclude any injudicious acceptance of students via backdoor dealings which would ruin the golden reputation of the school, there was supervision from both the military and the government. This completely prevented any possibility of abusing special rights to get into the school via a backdoor. So, even if he wanted to help Ling Xiao, he had no way to handle the government side of things, especially that wily old first premier.

"Marshal!" Ling Xiao's entire expression darkened. He stared intently at the marshal, gaze filled with dissatisfaction. For the sake of his child's future, he would not back off on this.

Seeing this side of Ling Xiao, the marshal was extremely troubled. Though Ling Xiao seemed very agreeable on the surface, he was actually very stubborn in his bones. Especially once he had decided on something, he would not rest until his objective was achieved.

"Godd*mmit!" The marshal breathed in an aggressive lungful of smoke, burning his cigarette down to the root. He rubbed out his cigarette butt heavily in the ashtray on the tea table, and with an exasperated expression on his face, he said, "If I could help you, I would definitely do it. But to enter the First Men's Military Academy, it's not just up to me. At the very least, you need to get through the first premier of the State Council."

Having said this, the marshal calmed down a little and continued to advise, "Ling Xiao, even if we allowed it, and your son was accepted, have you ever considered the fact that your son's body will not be able to endure past the first year? If his body was injured irrevocably because of this, won't you regret this?"

"Don't we have you?" Ling Xiao shot this question back at the marshal.

"What do you mean?" The marshal found that he could not keep up with Ling Xiao's train of thought.

"As long as you issue special dispensation, allowing Ling Lan to be exempt from the first year's exams, won't that be fine?" Ling Xiao had already made up his mind; in the first year, Ling Lan would not participate in any training at the school, only continuing to focus on recuperating.

"Ling Xiao, don't you go too far!" The marshal was about to blow up. It wasn't like the Federation's First Men's Military Academy was run by his family... he couldn't just waltz in and do as he liked!

"I recall that, as long as military headquarters issues a special cultivation plan for a student, they can have full jurisdiction over the student's first year of training." Ling Xiao had already thought of everything. However, this special cultivation plan still required the marshal to sign off on it, which was why he was still here holding up the marshal, trying to obtain his agreement.

"Let military headquarters issue a fake special cultivation plan? No way, this involves too much..." The marshal wanted to refuse instinctively.

"Didn't you say our 23rd Division was free to choose our mid-level and upper ranking officers as we liked? I can issue this special cultivation plan, with the intent to cultivate Ling Lan as a central pillar of the 23rd Division." For his son's future, Ling Xiao did not mind exploiting his power for personal gain.

"Ling Xiao, giving you command of the 23rd Division is not for you to play dictator!" When the marshal heard Ling Xiao declaring his blatant intention to abuse his power, he was instantly furious. Hells, couldn't he keep himself in check a little in front of him? No matter what, he was still the commander-in-chief in charge of monitoring all the army divisions of the Federation!

"Marshal, setting the relationship between Ling Lan and I aside, just based off Ling Lan's talent and potential alone, if he had not suffered an assassination attempt by an enemy nation three years ago and had remained healthy, would he have been accepted by the First Men's Military Academy this year?" The marshal's fury did not ruffle Ling Xiao; he merely continued to explain his point of view calmly.

The marshal nodded. Ling Lan's talent was no weaker than Ling Xiao's by much — if he had been able to grow up without interruption, even if he did not achieve Ling Xiao's heights, it would pretty much be no problem for him to become an ace operator.

"Then, at that time, when he graduates from the First Men's Military Academy, would he be qualified to be a central force of an army division?" pressed Ling Xiao.

The marshal said huffily, "Any student that comes out from the First Men's Military Academy is fought over by all army divisions for recruitment." Unsaid was the underlying agreement that if the assassination attempt had not happened, Ling Lan's future would be just as Ling Xiao was describing.

"Therefore, what I am planning to do is not abusing my power for personal gain, but rather, taking responsibility on behalf of the military." Ling Xiao's eyes were glowing with conviction. "Ling Lan was only injured in an assassination attempt because the enemy managed to infiltrate one of the troops sent by the military into the academy to protect the students. In other words, on this matter, the military should definitely take responsibility."

Frankly, the marshal also knew very well that the military should indeed take on the full responsibility for Ling Lan's assassination attempt. It was their carelessness and negligence that had allowed the enemy to infiltrate the academy successfully, finally resulting in this regretful mishap.

"We only need to bear the responsibility of shielding him for one year, and we would have salvaged the future of a prodigy. The debt the military owes him, I am only trying to help the military pay it back," said Ling Xiao righteously, just as if he truly had no personal stake in this at all.

The marshal did not know whether to laugh or cry at Ling Xiao's words — this Ling Xiao was truly unscrupulous in fighting for his objectives. But, he liked it, because this reasoning was sufficiently just and honourable.

"In that case, it is not necessary for you to issue this special cultivation plan. I will make the arrangements." The marshal did not want Ling Xiao to bear the bad name of abusing his power.

Ling Xiao did not care if he had to bear this so-called bad name or bad reputation, but since the marshal cared, he would not press the issue. Ling Xiao knew very well how

to leave a favourable impression on his superiors — a suitable degree of obedience and compliance was absolutely necessary.

That said, the marshal suddenly found that he had been unknowingly led astray from the main problem by Ling Xiao. "Why are we skipping to the end? Ling Xiao, you need to first convince the first premier. As long as the other agrees, then there won't be any problem on my end. Including everything else after, I can arrange it for you."

"Why is it necessary to convince him?" A smile bloomed on Ling Xiao's lips. Even though it appeared as warm and kind as ever, the marshal could just sense the hidden trace of deviousness behind it.

"I recall that there is this particular rule in the federal military ordinances. To commend the contributions of a soldier to the Federation, when a soldier becomes a general of the Federation, his son shall have the right to a secured place in the First Men's Military Academy. As long as the first marshal approves, he can enter the First Men's Military Academy directly to commence his studies. Since this is something granted by military authority, the government system has no right to object..."

The Federation was a militaristic nation where military exploits were supreme. No jurisdictional agency nor private individual could prevent a contributor of military exploits from using his special rights.

The marshal's face twitched as he looked at the general's outfit on Ling Xiao's body. He suddenly found himself regretting his actions — why had he moved so fast on Ling Xiao's promotion?

Apparently, the marshal had taken advantage of Ling Xiao's sudden return to life to suggest promoting Ling Xiao to the military rank of general while the other factions were still in disarray. As Ling Xiao's capabilities were unequivocally recognised, and his reputation preceded him, on top of the fact that the factions were utterly confounded by the news of his return, no one had found a reasonable excuse to object at short notice. Moreover, the government also wanted to use Ling Xiao's return to divert public attention, to stabilise the somewhat volatile domestic state of affairs of late, and so had given their energetic support to the suggestion. And so, under these myriad coincidences and circumstances, Ling Xiao's promotion to general did not garner much opposition, passing smoothly.

Afraid that things might change again, the marshal had signed off on the agreement

right then and there, and this matter had thus been settled. He just hadn't imagined that his kind intentions would come back to smash him in the foot, leaving him in the awkward position of riding a tiger ¹.

Mind you, this special right had been set aside for the commendation of a general's contributions to the Federation, but practically everyone assumed that it was just an honorary special right. This was because no one would ever use it, as it was almost impossible for someone to become a general before the ages of 60 to 70 years old. By that age, let alone sons, perhaps even their grandchildren would have already wedded wives and sired children. Who then would think to use this special right?

The marshal abruptly found that quite a few military special rights of the Federation at the moment were all just honorary in nature, for there was no one who could actually enjoy those benefits. But now, their existence was obviously there to open backdoors for Ling Xiao... Ling Xiao's age was just much too young.

"Alright, I've got it," said the marshal, resigned.

Seeing Ling Xiao still standing tall before him, he said exasperatedly, "What else do you want?" If this fellow dared to request anything else, he would definitely throw him out of here.

"The acceptance letter of the First Men's Military Academy!" demanded Ling Xiao.

"Ling Xiao, you really think I'm an omnipotent god? Seek and ye shall find — able to pull an acceptance letter out of thin air? Godd*mmit, scram! Go home, and wait there patiently!" roared the marshal.

Ling Xiao grinned at these words, and then saluted him respectfully, "Yes, Marshal!" He turned neatly to leave, but when he reached the doorway, he suddenly looked back to say, "Marshal, actually, I was just waiting for this statement of yours!" That said, he laughed loudly as he walked out the door.

"Darn brat!" The marshal couldn't help but scold even as he smiled. Only Ling Xiao would dare to be so impudent before him, asking for so much. This gave him a sense of kinship with the other. Ever since becoming the Federation's first marshal, on particular fronts, he had lost many things.

The moment Ling Xiao walked out the door, a major waiting patiently by the door perked up, his eyes brightening as he rushed over to salute and say, "General!"

"Let's go!" said Ling Xiao. He then led the way out of the 1st Division's headquarters to come to the courtyard gates.

A black luxury hover car was gliding towards them to slowly stop at the gates. Its position was very precise; Ling Xiao only needed to walk down 3 steps to get into the car.

The major rushed ahead of him to open the car door.

Ling Xiao stepped into the car and sat down. Only then did the major close the car door, taking a seat himself in the assistant's seat ².

This hover car was not controlled by an A.I., but by a human driver. A chauffeur was already seated in the driver's seat. His epaulette showed that he was also a major, clearly marking him as no ordinary chauffeur.

"Return to the temporary military camp!" said the major in the assistant's seat to the chauffeur.

The chauffeur nodded and began to slowly guide the hover car out. His driving was steady and his speed control was excellent — the passengers could not tell at all that the car was in motion.

Even though the hover car was driven very stably, its speed was not slow. In the blink of an eye, they had already disappeared into the horizon, heading swiftly to their destination.

Sitting in the hover car, Ling Xiao's feelings were currently very complicated.

He needed to go home now! He wondered if Luofeng would forgive him. After all, he had left mother and son alone for 17 years!

At this thought, Ling Xiao's heart cringed. Still, he knew that if he only returned home after the official announcement, Lan Luofeng would most certainly kick him out again.

He must go home as soon as possible! Ling Xiao did not know why, but he just had the feeling that his return this time was marked by terrible odds in his favour...

Chapter 195

General Ling!

On this day, as usual, Ling Lan was entering the combat room to carry out her basic training. However, not long after she began, she was interrupted by a grim-faced Ling Qin.

"Grandpa Ling Qin? Is something wrong?" Seeing the other's solemn expression, Ling Lan halted her movements to ask, as she grabbed a towel to wipe off her sweat.

"Master, we just received an urgent notification that the newly promoted General Ling is on his way to visit you." Ling Qin's expression was extremely perplexed.

It should be known that generals were the true military authority below the marshal — there were only nine of them in the entire Federation, inclusive of this newly promoted general. Each and every one of them was a commander-in-chief of one or more army divisions. Just a simple stomp of their feet was able to make the earth quake and the mountains shake within the Federation. This kind of personage whom they had to look up to in the past... why would someone like that make a personal visit to the Ling family?

If the old family head Ling Xiao had still been alive, he would not have found this so strange. After all, Ling Xiao was one of the mere twelve god-class operators of the Federation — even the marshal did not dare take him lightly. Thus, these generals too would not dare to treat him flippantly, so it was not impossible for them to come pay a visit. But now, the family head of the Ling family was Ling Lan who had barely turned 16. Furthermore, to the outside world, he was a youth who had sustained serious injuries which had limited his growth. A typical person would never pay much attention to the Ling family like this...

What worried Ling Qin the most was that the other's surname was Ling. Ling Qin could not help but be suspicious — could this visiting general be part of the old Ling elite family that they had chased out of Doha?

If that was the case, this might very likely be a warning from the other party. It could be that this visit may be to force the Ling family into paying some price! Unavoidably,

some apprehension reared up in Ling Qin's heart.

Hearing this, Ling Lan frowned lightly. She too was a little bothered by this surname Ling. However, she was not thinking as far or as complicated as Ling Qin was. She was only a little bummed because it had taken her so much effort to distance herself from the sights of the upper ranks of the military, but now all that effort may be wiped away by this General Ling's visit. This was going against her original plans.

Still, Ling Lan knew that since the military had already notified them, they were not in a position to refuse. She could only go with the flow and take things as they came.

"Grandpa Ling Qin, make preparations, and then we'll play things by ear!" Ling Lan still had a trump card in hand — she was the orphaned child of the god-class operator Ling Xiao. Even if this General Ling had any evil intentions against the Ling family, he would not dare to be too blatant about it.

"Yes, Family Head!" Ling Qin left with his orders.

Only then did Ling Lan return to her bedroom and change into a set of formal attire suitable for meeting guests. Since the other was a general, she could not afford to give offense.

As for Lan Luofeng, neither Ling Qin nor Ling Lan notified her. Ling Qin did not, because Ling Lan was already the family head of the Ling family. All household matters would be carried out according to Ling Lan's will — only if Ling Lan was not present would Ling Qin consider notifying Lan Luofeng. Meanwhile, Ling Lan did not, because she did not want to disturb Lan Luofeng with these matters. Ever since three years ago when Ling Xiao's legacy space had disappeared and his shade's final words were a reminder to take care of Lan Luofeng, Ling Lan had solidified Lan Luofeng as someone she would protect for the rest of her life.

When Ling Lan and company received the news that the general's car was about to arrive, Ling Lan led Ling Qin and Ling Yu to stand at the Ling family mansion gates to wait respectfully. As a common citizen with no battle exploits or ranking to her name, Ling Lan did not yet possess the right to wait indoors to greet the general.

The first thing that came into view were two miniature mecha. Ling Lan could tell from the emblem at their chests that they were part of the mecha escort forces available to those of general rank in the military. Behind them was a convoy consisting of five

luxury hover cars, with three miniature mecha on each side, and another two miniature mecha protecting the convoy's flank. The entire procession was flying swiftly towards them.

The general's procession was surprisingly simple, not at all as ostentatious as Ling Lan had expected. Ten miniature mecha and five luxury hover cars, so simple was the convoy which made its way over. This gave Ling Lan a better impression of this General Ling; at the very least, he did not give off an air of oppression.

When the convoy arrived at the Ling family gates, the ten mecha hovered up in the air, beginning to monitor all directions of the convoy. At the same time, from four of the luxury hover cars, ten or so fully-equipped guards disembarked and swiftly formed a large circle around the last remaining hover car in a tight defensive formation.

Subsequently, the car door on the assistant seat's side of that last hover car opened, and a major who was approximately 30 years old stepped out from the car. After taking a careful look around, he then opened the back door of the hover car.

Ling Lan then saw a figure dressed in a general's uniform step out from the hover car, head bowed and waist bent. She did not know if it was just a misperception, but Ling Lan sensed that the other was somewhat nervous in that split second when he had stepped out of the car... this made Ling Lan rather puzzled.

But this was no time to ponder. Ling Lan quickly suppressed this puzzlement and rallied her spirits, and led Ling Qin and Ling Yu to hurry forwards in welcome.

Right then, that General Ling lifted his head and looked over. When his eyes met Ling Lan's, the both of them felt a jolt in their hearts.

The moment Ling Lan saw that person's face, she almost lost all colour in her face. That face was still clearly etched in her memory — not only because Lan Luofeng constantly rambled at her with Ling Xiao's picture before her face, but because that face had accompanied her through a large part of her childhood in the legacy space.

Ling Qin's reaction was even worse. Overcome with emotion, he could not stop his body from trembling, his jaw opening wide, trying to call out that name in his memories. But perhaps due to being too emotional, his voice just would not work.

"Uncle Qin, long time no see!" Seeing this, Ling Xiao could not help but greet him with a wry smile. Meeting the person who had taken care of him from young again after 17

years, his feelings were a complicated mess — he almost burst into uncontrollable tears.

"Master..." Ling Qin finally squeezed out, his tears unlocked in a sudden torrent.

As the current leader of the Ling family mecha squad, Ling Yu's heart was also filled with stunned shock. After all, Ling Xiao was the idol of his youth. However, compared to Ling Qin's emotional state, he was somewhat calmer. This was because he was now the leader of the mecha protection squad of the current family head, Ling Lan. As such, he was only loyal to Ling Lan, so even in his excitement, he reflexively looked towards Ling Lan for instruction.

"Your Excellency General Ling, please forgive the attendants of yours truly for their disrespect! Please come in!" Ling Lan threw a cold glance at Ling Qin, jolting Ling Qin to awareness instantly. He knew that he had forgotten himself, and quickly stepped back to stand behind Ling Lan, no longer daring to even look at Ling Xiao.

Right then, Ling Lan had become extremely calm. The torments she had suffered for 16 years in the learning space showed their extraordinary results now — Ling Lan did not lose her composure just because the other looked like Ling Xiao. Before the other properly expressed his identity, they could not afford to trip over themselves.

Ling Lan's courteous response caused Ling Xiao's steps to slow, and the smile on his face froze for a beat. However, he knew that this was not an appropriate place for discussion, so he braced himself and walked through the gates.

This was clearly his own home, but now it was like he was just here as a visitor! Looking at his son's attitude, he was extremely unwelcome... there was no hint of pleasant surprise at seeing his father. Instead, his son was carefully on guard against him, just as if he had come to steal something or another — this was really too much! Resentment sprouted in Ling Xiao's heart — he had wanted to hug him close or do something along those lines, but unfortunately, it looked like his son would not give him this chance.

Ling Lan watched Ling Xiao walking ahead of her, and her mind started turning in puzzlement: What was going on? Could it be that this Ling Xiao before her was really Ling Xiao? The Federation used genetical DNA testing to determine a person's real identity though, so this completely precluded the possibility of someone impersonating Ling Xiao through plastic surgery. Still, Ling Lan could not help but be

suspicious — because this General Ling had truly appeared at such a coincidental time. Ling Lan still remembered that Ling Xiao's legacy space had disappeared three years ago...

Of course, perhaps the Ling Xiao before her was really Ling Xiao — but then why did he fake his death for 17 years? And why had he suddenly chosen to resurface again now? Was there some deep mystery to explain this? He had to go complete some top secret mission? And so had no choice but to fake his death? Or perhaps Ling Xiao had not died on the way to that battlefield, but had been rescued and lost his memory?

At this moment, Ling Lan was filling in the blanks in her mind with her imagination, countless scenarios flashing through her head. In particular, imagining the possibility that Ling Xiao had remarried and birthed more children during his amnesia, only to suddenly regain his memory 17 years later to return home... a blaze of anger flared in Ling Lan's heart. Whatever the case, it was an injustice to her mother Lan Luofeng. Casting aside one's wife and child for his career, status, and prestige — this man deserves to be killed! Remarrying and starting a new family due to memory loss, it would be fine if he just stayed away and never returned. But coming back to try and enjoy a life with two separate families — he would still deserve to be killed!

Ling Xiao, who was walking ahead, suddenly felt a chill run through his body. Somehow, he kept sensing some unexplainable killing intent around him... but who here would want to kill him? Ling Xiao shook his head, baffled, and chased away that chill in his heart.

Entering the Ling family mansion, Ling Xiao saw the familiar great hall before his eyes. A photo of him and Lan Luofeng still hung on the wall, but of course there was now a new picture beside it. It was a photo of Ling Lan on the day she turned 16 years old.

This familiar setting caused Ling Xiao's eyes to well up with heat, tears almost falling from his eyes. Fortunately, the trials he had gone through in these past few years had made his heart much stronger than it had been 17 years ago; Ling Xiao managed to control this surge of emotion.

"Uncle Qin, where's Luofeng? Is she doing well?" First off, Ling Xiao wanted to know whether the person that mattered most in his heart was doing well.

Ling Qin was just about to answer when he thought of something. He turned to look at Ling Lan, waiting for her instruction. Although Ling Xiao was Ling Lan's father, Lan

Luofeng's husband and their previous family head, the present family head was Ling Lan. He needed to first obtain Ling Lan's approval before responding.

From Ling Lan's behaviour at the gates, Ling Qin perceptively sensed Ling Lan's unhappiness with Ling Xiao. There was even some wariness in her demeanour. This made Ling Qin have no choice but to become cautious as well — as his emotions slowly settled down, Ling Qin too began thinking that the sudden appearance of this General Ling before them was just too coincidental.

After all, Ling Xiao had already been officially dead for 17 years... if this General Ling was really Ling Xiao, then why had he hidden away for these 17 years? Ling Qin's gut feeling was that there was a deeper story behind all this. Before he could remain level-headed in the face of Ling Xiao's return to life, it would be better for him not to act presumptuously. He might as well leave the current situation in the hands of his current family head, Young Master Lan.

These past 3 years, Ling Lan's performance at home had completely convinced Ling Qin. He believed that Ling Lan was fully capable of handling all this — so he lowered his head and kept silent, taking one step back to make Ling Lan stand out more. With this move, he was showing Ling Xiao that Ling Lan was the current master of the Ling family.

Chapter 196

An Infuriated Ling Xiao!

Ling Xiao's eyes glimmered. Both Ling Qin's demeanour, as well as the manner of the other young man behind him, proved that the barely 16 years old Ling Lan had truly taken charge of the Ling family. He was truly the family head, not just in name. This pleased and surprised Ling Xiao greatly. Some smugness rose faintly in his heart — as expected of a son of his.

Of course, even as Ling Xiao was heartened by this, he could not help the anxiety in his heart. After all, he still had not received the answer he wanted. Thus, he turned his head to look towards Ling Lan, hope in his eyes, wishing for Ling Lan to give him a satisfactory answer.

However, as if not seeing Ling Xiao's beseeching gaze, Ling Lan merely took one step forwards and waved at the sofa, saying politely, "General Ling, please have a seat."

A tendril of rage rose in Ling Xiao's heart, and his presence flared involuntarily. This brat was really giving him no face! Did he not know how anxious he was to find out about his wife?!

Facing Ling Xiao's pressing presence, Ling Lan continued to maintain her icy expression, unmoved. It should be known that after facing Instructor Number One's tremendous force of presence over a long period of time, Ling Lan had already developed some immunity against this sort of pressure. Of course, this was also due to the fact that Ling Xiao's presence still retained some gentleness, not pressing down much harder than Instructor Number One's.

Seeing the unmoved Ling Lan, Ling Xiao could only sullenly take a seat on the living room sofa. Although he was secretly a little annoyed that Ling Lan did not recognise him, he did not dare to fly off the handle. After all, his 17 years of absence gave him no confidence to yell at Ling Lan that he was his father, so he could only quietly tolerate Ling Lan's cold treatment of him.

Ling Lan called the servants to serve up tea. Ling Xiao took a sip of his tea — the familiar taste sent a jolt through Ling Xiao's heart, and he could not help but open his

mouth again to say, "Ling Lan, come, let your mother out. There are some things we need to have a good discussion about."

Ling Lan said placidly, "General Ling, my father has been dead for 17 years. As his widow, my mother has always lived a simple and secluded life. It is probably inappropriate for her to meet a strange man. If you have any matters to discuss, you can just tell me. I will pass on a message to my mother."

Ling Lan had already made up her mind. Before she figured out what had happened, she would not let Lan Luofeng out to see Ling Xiao. If she truly found Ling Xiao to be an irresponsible man, or a present-era Chen Shimei¹, she would definitely chase the other out straightforwardly to protect her mother. Even if she was no match for Ling Xiao in terms of both power and strength, with Little Four's help, she should still be able to use the influence of the virtual world to bring disgrace and ruin down upon Ling Xiao.

In the mindsphere, Little Four was raising his fists high in response to Ling Lan's thoughts, his entire appearance screaming the fact that he would attack and withdraw as his boss commands. But in a place unseen by Ling Lan, he was slumped on the floor, crying, '*Boo hoo hoo, I don't want Dad to be a Chen Shimei...'*

Ling Lan's extremely cold response made Ling Xiao choke on a breath. He suddenly found that this son of his was so mature and cool-headed that it was somewhat annoying... shouldn't he be overjoyed by his return and be urging Lan Luofeng to come out so their family could reunite? This kind of courteous speech — he was totally treating him as a stranger! No, a stranger may have received better treatment... the coldness in that brat's eyes clearly showed that he was seeing him as a boss-level enemy.

Ling Xiao could clearly tell that Ling Lan must have recognised him by now. Back when they first saw each other, he had seen the emotional upheaval in Ling Lan's eyes. However, Ling Lan had swiftly pushed down those emotions, and after regaining his calm he had begun to react defensively every step of the way, showing no sign that he would like to acknowledge Ling Xiao as his father. This knowledge made Ling Xiao so frustrated that he could almost puke blood.

"Ling Lan, I am your father Ling Xiao!" In the end, Ling Xiao could not hold back, revealing his identity in curt, bitten off words. He had only wanted to come home and be reunited with his family — to hug his wife by a warm hearth, to bounce his son on his knee... was that too much to ask?

At these words, a trace of contempt appeared on Ling Lan's lips. "Oh? Then, 17 years ago, what was that notification we received from the military informing the Ling family about Ling Xiao's demise?"

Ling Xiao kneaded his forehead, smiling bitterly as he said, "Back then, I was blasted by that magnetic energy turbulence in the death tunnel to an unknown location. Honestly, I was lucky. Due to the intense collisions of energy, a black hole was created, allowing me to escape death. However, through the black hole was an unknown world². I couldn't find my bearings anywhere on a Federation star chart. To find my way home, I spent a whole 17 years. Only 10 days ago, when the black hole I had gone through opened again due to the energy turbulence caused by a battle between the Federation and the Twilight Empire, did I manage to find my way back here."

Ling Xiao briefly explained why he had 'died' for 17 years. Back then, everyone had indeed thought that he was dead. Meanwhile, he had been drifting in a foreign land all this time. Back then, he too did not have the confidence that he would live to return to the Federation.

Hearing this, Ling Lan's hanging hands clenched into fists, her heart rate spiking. Did this mean that Ling Xiao had had no intentions of leaving her mum and herself behind from the start?

"Not long after, the military will publicly announce this matter, and you all will know everything. As for my promotion to general, that's because I was already eligible for promotion to Lieutenant General 17 years ago. But at that time, the Federation wanted to push their advantage to eradicate the Twilight Empire, and so intentionally concealed my rank, letting me lead the 7th Division to attack Twilight before the other nations could react..." Ling Xiao explained the truth of the matter back then, revealing why he had appeared at the frontlines despite being a god-class operator.

"However, at the time, the marshal had suddenly fallen deeply ill, causing the main authority of military headquarters to fall to those below him. Who knows whether it was because of the resulting power struggle, but the plan to attack Twilight was leaked. Or perhaps there were already spies in the highest ranks of the military... In any case, the Twilight Empire found out that the eradication plan would be carried out by me, and so created a series of plots and schemes targeting me..."

"Although the marshal took back military control post-haste after he recovered, it was too late. I had already been led skilfully to the spot they had crafted..." Regret was clear

on Ling Xiao's face. This sequence of unfortunate events had thus caused him to be separated from his wife and son for 17 years.

Ling Qin's face was filled with true emotion. He looked towards Ling Lan, waiting for her to soften.

"A very interesting story..." Ling Lan sipped her tea and then continued calmly, "I am very interested in your 17 years of life in that unknown world. What kind of world was it?" Who knew if Ling Xiao hadn't been able to bear the loneliness and had found some pleasure companion or whatnot to be by his side... it was better to figure all of this out before deciding whether or not to let her mother Lan Luofeng come out.

At Ling Lan's words, Ling Xiao paused for a moment, startled at this avenue of questioning. He smiled wryly and said, "That was a primitive world. It did not have the technological advancements of our Federation. You could even say that there were no starships, no aircrafts, and no mecha. When I first landed there, those people thought I was a god..."

"A god, is it?" Ling Lan abruptly lifted her head up to look straight at Ling Xiao, her gaze cold and piercing. "I would like to ask you — in these 17 years, did you find a new woman there?"

Ling Xiao flew into a rage at these words, barking, "How could that be?! I already have your mother."

"You've said before, back then you too did not know whether you would be able to come back. Did you never consider building a new family there or something?" asked Ling Lan with a quirk of her brow. It was clear to see that Ling Lan did not believe Ling Xiao's denial.

"Other than your mother, I do not want any other woman." Ling Xiao abruptly stood up, his gentle air completely gone. In his rage, Ling Xiao could not restrain himself from releasing the dominant air hidden within his bones, "I, Ling Xiao, am definitely not that type of unfaithful, two-timing person."

Ling Lan's suspicious questions had undoubtedly caused Ling Xiao to feel deeply affronted. In these past 17 years, there had indeed been women who had flirted and confessed to him, but his heart had always been true to Lan Luofeng and that child in her belly. Thus, he had resolutely turned away all temptation, putting all his mind and

effort on getting back. In these 17 years, he had been hard at work in every waking moment, even making many concessions in his quest to return.

Although Ling Xiao was extremely angry, he still remembered that this was the Ling family. He did not unleash all of his force of presence, only focusing it on Ling Lan. He felt that this obnoxious brat really needed a good lesson, actually daring to question his integrity and feelings. It was outrageous!

Ling Lan gave a muffled grunt, the vital energies in her chest roiling, almost forcing out a mouthful of blood. She knew that this was the pressure from Ling Xiao's focused rage, an outcome she had prompted, but she did not regret it at all. Knowing for sure that Ling Xiao had not betrayed Lan Luofeng, she could then hand over Lan Luofeng to Ling Xiao without worry.

"Ling Xiao, how impressive of you! Bullying us, mother and child, the moment you return?" A crisp voice rang out from above, tone filled with subtle anger. A bolt of joy ran through Ling Xiao's heart at this familiar voice; his rampaging spiritual pressure was instantly retracted.

"Luofeng!" Ling Xiao walked forwards emotionally, reaching out to try and wrap his arms around Lan Luofeng who was coming down the stairs.

Lan Luofeng fiercely pushed aside Ling Xiao's arms, completely ignoring him to run to Ling Lan's side. Face filled with worry and distress, she asked, "Ling Lan, how are you? Are you hurt?"

Ling Lan circulated her Qi through her body once along the pathways of the Qi exercises, and her initially heavy and tight chest felt much better. Ling Xiao had only wanted to give Ling Lan a small lesson and had not been trying to hurt her — Ling Xiao still remembered that Ling Lan's body was currently injured, so he dared not use too much force.

Seeing Lan Luofeng's teary and frantic manner, Ling Lan quickly reassured her, saying, "Mummy, I'm fine!"

Seeing that her precious daughter was fine, Lan Luofeng could then turn to addressing the culprit who had almost hurt her daughter. She instantly morphed into a maternal beast protecting her offspring, charging over fiercely to Ling Xiao's front, and pressed a forceful finger onto Ling Xiao's chest, scolding, "Ling Xiao, you bastard, you dare to

bully my child? Do you really think I, Lan Luofeng, am so easy to bully?" That said, she rolled up her sleeves, and threw her fists at Ling Xiao in rage, as if beating at a drum.

In response, Ling Xiao could only run for his life, dodging as he apologised and pleaded for mercy. Right then, he did not look any bit like the god-class operator and general he was.

Ling Lan's face twitched uncontrollably. She lifted her head to look up at the great chandelier hanging above them, wondering if she could disappear from here now to show that she really did not know this couple before her...

Inside Ling Lan's mindspace, Little Four was gaping in shock and bewilderment. That man fleeing so gracelessly, repeatedly begging for mercy all the way... was he still that gentle and dashing, unbelievably handsome daddy of his? Also, was that ferocious female warrior chasing and beating him in a frenzy still that so-gentle-she-seemed-to-be-made-of-water mummy of his memory? He felt as if his whole world had been turned upside down.

Chapter 197

A Determined Destiny!

Finally, at a moment when Ling Xiao could guarantee that he would not hurt Lan Luofeng by accident, he pulled her into his embrace, holding her close as he apologised over and over again, "Luofeng, it's my fault. I shouldn't have lost my temper..."

In Ling Xiao's arms, Lan Luofeng struggled for a bit, but finding that she really could not move, her expression crumbled and she broke out into sobs, "You bastard. You already left for 17 years... if you don't come back, that's that, but why do you bully us, mother and child, right after coming back? Who gave you the right?"

Ling Xiao rushed to apologise again, "I'm sorry! It's my fault! It's all my fault!"

"Of course it's your fault!" As a wife, Lan Luofeng was still somewhat reasonable, but as a mother, bullying her kid was definitely unconscionable.

At this moment, how would Ling Xiao dare to say anything to defend himself? He could only continue to agree, "Yes, yes, yes, it's definitely my fault!"

Ling Lan finally understood what was meant by 'even heroes need to back off sometimes'¹! Against her ferocious mum, her dad could only back off. However, Ling Lan could clearly tell from the light shining from Ling Xiao's eyes that this was a willing concession on his part. This also proved that all those things Ling Xiao had said in his fury previously were all true.

Seeing this, Ling Lan let out a large sigh of relief inside her heart. Being able to see her parents of this world being lovey-dovey — happiness welled up in her heart.

However, when she saw that the two before her still showed no sign of separating, she couldn't help but sweatdrop. Hells, they should really mind their shining image, right? There were still outsiders around, you know! So, Ling Lan coughed heavily and reminded them, "Perhaps, we should sit down and discuss things properly?"

Lan Luofeng was jolted to awareness, and she quickly pushed Ling Xiao away with a face filled with embarrassment. She quickly walked over to Ling Lan and holding Ling

Lan's hand, she turned with a proud look to say to Ling Xiao, "Ling Xiao, this is our child, Ling Lan. The best child ever ²!"

Ling Xiao smiled and nodded, "Yes, I know. Ling Lan, my child, is indeed very good!" Although Ling Lan was sufficiently exceptional, Ling Xiao felt that he should not praise his son too much. He needed to push him down a little, and not pamper him like he would a daughter. Honestly, he had really wished for a daughter who resembles Lan Luofeng... but it's alright, they would just have to continue working on it in future.

Lan Luofeng shook Ling Lan's hand in hers as she smiled blissfully, "Ling Lan, he is your daddy Ling Xiao, isn't he great?" Her face was filled with anticipation, looking forward to Ling Lan's acknowledgement of Ling Xiao, and for her to call him 'daddy'.

Ling Lan nodded and said calmly, "Mm, Mum, your judgment is pretty good." But she just could not call him 'daddy' just yet.

Perhaps Ling Lan had given all her emotions towards Ling Xiao to the spiritual entity within Ling Xiao's legacy space, so now when she was facing the real Ling Xiao, Ling Lan actually felt somewhat distant from him, making her unable to call him 'daddy' right away.

Ling Xiao seemed to understand Ling Lan's hesitation. He did not push the matter, skipping past it with a smile. Lan Luofeng could only sigh. 17 years of absence made it impossible for Ling Xiao and Ling Lan to abruptly have an affectionate father-child relationship.

Ling Lan saw that Ling Xiao and Lan Luofeng seemed to have much to say to one another; knowing that this was not a good time for them light bulbs ³ to hang around, she indicated for Ling Qin and the others to leave. This included the secret service officer, that major who had entered the Ling family mansion along with Ling Xiao.

Of course, when that major left, his expression was somewhat twisted. It was clear to see that Ling Xiao's current demeanour had completely overturned the valiant and dashing image of General Ling Xiao that all soldiers had in their hearts.

By the time Ling Lan and the others saw Ling Xiao and Lan Luofeng again, it was already the morning of the second day. As for what they had been doing all this time, Lan Luofeng's bashful manner and sultry eyes were pretty glaring clues.

At this moment, Ling Lan was seated at the dining table, playing host to the only guest

free to attend breakfast — that secret service officer assigned to Ling Xiao. They were eating a simple breakfast together. Seeing her parents appear in that state, Ling Lan's facial muscles twitched involuntarily. Did these two people not know how to be a little more reserved?

Ling Lan suddenly recalled that her mum was a lustful woman nearing 40 years of age⁴, and could not help but cast a pitying glance at Ling Xiao. She hoped that he had not been squeezed dry by this mother of hers who was, at present, just like a hungry tiger or wolf.

Perhaps Ling Lan's gaze had been too obvious, for Ling Xiao's handsome face actually blushed when he met her eyes. Ling Lan was very surprised by this — who knew her dad who was over 40 would have such thin skin...?

"What are you looking at?" As she sat down, Lan Luofeng rapped Ling Lan lightly on the head in embarrassment, secretly annoyed at how strange Ling Lan's gaze was.

"Nothing!" said Ling Lan with a straight face. Her cold and stern face looked as unmoved as ever, making Lan Luofeng almost doubt whether she had misjudged Ling Lan's expression due to her own guilty conscience.

Ling Xiao, however, was a god-class operator after all; his senses were extremely perceptive, so Ling Lan's little tricks naturally could not fool him. He coughed awkwardly and then changed the topic to say, "Right, Ling Lan, I forgot to tell you some great news!"

Ling Lan raised a brow, unsure what great news Ling Xiao could be referring to.

"You will be guaranteed admission into the First Men's Military Academy! The school's acceptance letter should be here in a few days." Ling Xiao's following words made Ling Lan spit out the milk in her mouth she had yet to swallow. Meanwhile, Lan Luofeng's chopsticks fell from her hand to drop onto the plates on the table, causing a ringing clatter to echo in the room.

"What did you say?" said Ling Lan in fright as she coughed.

Smiling proudly, Ling Xiao said, "I said, you can go study at the First Men's Military Academy now." His expression that was all but screaming 'quick, thank me!' almost made Ling Lan feel like kicking him in the face.

"Don't you know that my body's injuries still haven't fully recovered? Even if I go, I won't be able to get past the first year of extra tough physical conditioning." Ling Lan's composure had finally cracked; she could not hold back her exasperation as she replied.

Ling Xiao's expression was solemn as he replied, "Of course I know. But, Ling Lan, don't worry, I have arranged everything. For the first year, you will receive special treatment and be exempt from exams. I will make sure to let your body recover fully before letting you go through physical conditioning. I will not let your body retain any latent problems."

Ling Xiao's words were said with steel-like conviction. He had already considered everything that needed to be considered, the only thing that he had not considered was the problematic off-chance that his son was actually a daughter...

Looking at the self-satisfied Ling Xiao who seemed to have thought of everything, Ling Lan looked speechlessly at Lan Luofeng. Her eyes were questioning: *Mum, did you not tell Dad about my true gender...?*

Lan Luofeng shot back with her gaze: *Can't you see I just hadn't found the time yet?*

Ling Lan puffed up her cheeks, filled with contempt for her mum. She dare say that the two of them had been too busy canoodling, and so her mum had completely forgotten that there was still this major issue to communicate.

Lan Luofeng glanced at the secret service officer, He Xuyang, who was stealing careful glances at them from one corner of the dining table. Ling Xiao had introduced him previously as the officer who had been assigned to him by headquarters after he became a general. Whether he was loyal to Ling Xiao remained to be seen in the coming days. As such, such a major issue as Ling Lan's gender was not appropriate to be shared with Ling Xiao here.

Yet, this matter was of the utmost urgency and could not be concealed any longer. Mind you, once Ling Lan entered the Men's Academy, she would have to undergo a full body check-up. At that time, Ling Lan's female gender would not be able to remain hidden — this was also the main reason why Lan Luofeng had not wanted Ling Lan to enter a boys' military school.

Frantic, Lan Luofeng abruptly stood up, and pulled Ling Xiao, who had just been about

to eat breakfast, up with her as well.

"Ling Xiao, I feel there is something I still need to share with you," said Lan Luofeng.

Ling Xiao's face was filled with bafflement, but he still complied with Lan Luofeng's arrangement. He put down his bowl and chopsticks and left the dining hall with Lan Luofeng, returning to the bedroom where they had spent a sensuous night.

Of course, as they left, Ling Xiao happened to see the astonished expression of the major, who seemed somewhat shocked at his amazing stamina... this made Ling Xiao's face burn with mortification — Lan Luofeng's words had truly left too much room for interpretation.

The moment Lan Luofeng arrived at the bedroom, she shut the door and pounced forward to cling to Ling Xiao and said, "Ling Xiao, Ling Lan definitely cannot be allowed to go to the First Men's Military Academy."

Ling Xiao was taken aback. "Why?" He had already arranged everything — why was Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan so against this? Ling Lan's expression at the dining table had been too obvious; he naturally picked up on his son's true feelings on the matter.

Through clenched teeth, Lan Luofeng hissed softly, "That's because Ling Lan is a girl. She's a daughter, not a son!"

Ling Xiao was instantly stupefied. Face filled with disbelief, he stuttered, "Wh-what d-did you say?"

"I said that our Ling Lan is a daughter not a son," Lan Luofeng repeated.

"Daughter?!" Before Ling Xiao could yell out in shock, Lan Luofeng had covered his mouth and forced those words back into his throat.

"It's fine if you know. What are you yelling for?" Lan Luofeng glared at Ling Xiao with censure.

Ling Xiao could not help but rub his forehead, "How did you even think of getting Ling Lan to pretend to be a son?"

Lan Luofeng said angrily, "Isn't this all because of your sudden death? In order to inherit your premium military benefits, I had no choice. Otherwise who knows if the

two of us, mother and child, would have been flayed and eaten alive by those greedy Ling elite family members?"

Ling Xiao was instantly enlightened. Back then, everyone must have been eyeing the right to inherit what he had left behind. Even if Lan Luofeng had been willing to surrender Ling Lan's inheritance rights, to make sure there were no loose ends, the Ling family clan would definitely have secretly gotten rid of Ling Lan even if they left Lan Luofeng alone. Only if Ling Lan obtained the right to inherit would she also receive care and protection from the military, thus earning the safety and security to continue living. This was one of the reasons why Lan Luofeng had chosen as she had. At the heart of it, it was still his, Ling Xiao's, fault!

Ling Xiao hugged Lan Luofeng close lovingly, and couldn't help but sigh in gratitude, "Luofeng, thank you, for protecting our daughter!"

Lan Luofeng pounded Ling Xiao's chest once in response, and said worriedly, "What do we do now?"

Ling Xiao's mind whirled. Because the plan to guarantee Ling Lan's admission into the First Men's Military Academy had been obtained after so much effort on his part, if he suddenly said that his son wasn't going anymore, all those involved in arranging this, including the marshal, would definitely become suspicious. This was because he had truly planned everything too perfectly, almost excluding all possible reasons not to go.

If Ling Lan did not go, they might start paying even more attention to her instead... If Ling Lan had previously shown herself to be a degenerate good-for-nothing, they might still be able to argue that Ling Lan was unwilling to work hard and suffer through training. But unfortunately, Ling Lan had performed exceptionally well at the scout academy, and was a truly buildable prodigy in everyone's eyes...

This would just lead everyone to speculate in other directions, perhaps even placing Ling Lan under closer military surveillance — this was definitely nothing good for Ling Lan. On the other hand, entering the First Men's Military Academy, the main issue would be how to conceal her real gender from others...

Ling Lan's stony visage floated to the forefront of Ling Xiao's mind — there was nothing at all feminine about her. Honestly speaking, if he were to stand side-by-side with Ling Lan, and let others guess who was the girl between the two of them, the probability of others mistaking him over Ling Lan for a girl would be much higher. It

was safe to say that Ling Lan had already achieved a miraculous realm with her impersonation of a man.

At this thought, Ling Xiao couldn't help but admire Lan Luofeng at her success in training their daughter to impersonate a man. No one had discovered the charade these past 16 years, including the marshal and himself — everyone had truly believed that Ling Lan was a boy.

Ling Xiao's brain began to swiftly shift through which events in the military academy would threaten to expose Ling Lan's gender, and then find a method to resolve it. In the end, he found that if he manipulated things well enough, Ling Lan could safely evade all the threats and remain undiscovered. As long as Ling Lan could graduate successfully from the military academy, Ling Xiao believed that with his resourcefulness, he could definitely construct an alternate identity for Ling Lan, allowing Ling Lan to live freely within his 23rd Division with two separate identities...

Overall, it would be much better than thrusting Ling Lan into the military's sights right this moment! Ling Xiao decided instantly that he would still let Ling Lan study at the First Men's Military Academy.

Although Ling Xiao had decided, at the thought that he would be sending his precious daughter into a den of hungry wolves and tigers⁵, his chest felt tight and he could almost vomit blood.

He could not help but clench his hands into tight fists, and growl mentally: If any presumptuous snot-nosed brat dared to lay a finger on his precious daughter, he would definitely tear the other to pieces, crush his bones, and scatter his ashes!

Chapter 198

Cruel Punishment

Ling Xiao's planning was quite perfect, but it did not receive Lan Luofeng's approval. In fact, when Lan Luofeng heard that Ling Xiao had decided to let Ling Lan study in the First Men's Military Academy anyway, she went berserk.

Lan Luofeng did not want her daughter to continue impersonating a man. Ling Lan was already 16 years old — this was the best time for a young girl to develop, but because she had to impersonate a man, to avoid being discovered, Ling Lan had always been injected with hormone suppressors, restricting the oestrogen levels in her body to prevent the development of her gender. The military had always insisted that hormone suppressors were harmless to the human body, and that once one stopped using them, one's body would quickly recover its equilibrium and return to normal.

Of course, the military had not invented this hormone suppressor for contraceptive purposes, nor was it meant for turning women into men — rather, it was meant to ensure the survival ability of female soldiers on the battlefield.

Mind you, there would always be several days every month when a woman would be inconvenienced and feel uncomfortable, their spiritual energy and physical strength dropping below their usual standards. It was still fine during regular times, but in the event of a battle, these reasons would cause a female soldier's combat capability to drop, risking her life. Thus, any female soldier who was about to enter a battlefield would be injected with a shot of hormone suppressor beforehand, ensuring that they were not bothered by feminine issues for half a year.

Of course, agents such as this hormone suppressor were categorised as semi-restricted medicinal agents, unavailable to the general populace. However, the Ling family had had two generations within the upper ranks of the military, after all. Even though Ling Xiao had died, the connections he left behind had still been enough to gain these not highly sought agents for the Ling family quite easily.

Ever since Ling Lan turned 10, she had begun injecting herself with these hormone suppressors, and this had continued for 6 years. Lan Luofeng had always been concerned that Ling Lan would suffer some lasting complications due to the long-term

use of these hormone suppressors. After all, female soldiers would not be injected with hormone suppressors over a long period of time like Ling Lan — they would only take a shot right before battle during critical periods, and once the battle ended, they would stop using the suppressors immediately.

This time, Ling Xiao's sudden revival had given Lan Luofeng a great joyful surprise while also letting her put down the great rock she had pressing on her heart all this while. Lan Luofeng thought that as long as Ling Xiao was back, Ling Lan's impersonation as a man would naturally be resolved.

This was why when Lan Luofeng had first heard that Ling Xiao had bumblingly sent their daughter into the First Men's Military Academy before knowing the truth, though she had been stunned, she had not been worried or angry. After all, Ling Xiao just hadn't known that Ling Lan was a girl at the time. Therefore, Lan Luofeng had rationally pulled Ling Xiao back to their bedroom to discreetly tell Ling Xiao this secret.

Lan Luofeng had initially hoped that Ling Xiao would then think of a way to refuse Ling Lan's acceptance into the First Men's Military Academy, but unexpectedly, the answer she received in the end was still to let her precious daughter continue living as a man for another 6 years. Not just that, she would have to do so living under the same roof as a group of other men... this made Lan Luofeng blow her top.

"No way! I will not allow my daughter to enter the all-male First Men's Military Academy. Ling Lan is a girl!" Lan Luofeng was currently extremely thankful that every bedroom in the Ling family mansion had been installed with soundproofing — even if the two of them were screaming at one another, no one outside would be able to hear.

"I know. I promise I will arrange everything properly. No one will discover Ling Lan's true gender." Ling Xiao tried to reassure the hysterical Lan Luofeng, trying to calm her down.

But these words of his just made Lan Luofeng even madder. She pointed an angry finger at Ling Xiao's nose, "Ling Xiao, what is the basis of your promise? 17 years ago, you promised that you would return, but you broke your promise, ending up 'dead' for a whole 17 years, leaving me and Ling Lan to suffer and be bullied, even ending up in this kind of difficult situation. Now, you're talking to me again of promises? Will you only be content after Ling Lan's life and reputation are utterly ruined?"

At this moment, Lan Luofeng was completely unwilling to believe anything Ling Xiao had to say. As a mother, her concerns and fears were much greater than Ling Xiao's — she knew well that if Ling Lan's true gender ever got out while she was in the First Men's Military Academy, Ling Lan's life would truly be over. No one would be willing to believe in her chastity and innocence, especially since she had been living together with so many men in one place.

Even if Ling Lan did not mind, and Ling Xiao did not mind, as a mother, Lan Luofeng could not accept her own daughter being side-eyed and treated with scorn by others. This would drive her mad!

"I had already had everything planned out, letting Ling Lan distance herself from Doha, distance herself from the sights of the upper ranks of the military so that she could slowly fade out and recover her true gender to live freely... but all this was ruined by you! Why did you not return earlier or later, choosing precisely this time to come back?"

So speaking, Lan Luofeng's eyes were glittering with resentment. She hated that Ling Xiao had returned at such a coincidental time, returning at this critical period when Ling Lan was about to decide her future path... and then presumptuously changing the path they had already arranged, causing Ling Lan to once again fall into such a dangerous plight.

"I'm sorry, Luofeng, I was too impatient. When I saw that Ling Lan had missed the opportunity to enter the First Men's Military Academy due to her injuries, I lost control. I just didn't want my child to be disappointed — she was so exceptional at the scout academy; she must have wanted to enter the First Men's Military Academy... I just assumed." Ling Xiao hugged Lan Luofeng close as he apologised repeatedly, "What's done is done. I can only do my best to make up for this mistake. Refusing is not impossible, but the risk Ling Lan will face in doing so will not be any less than if she were to enter the First Men's Military Academy!"

When Lan Luofeng heard there would be risks involved either way, she calmed down and waited. Ling Xiao immediately took the chance to explain to her the reasoning behind his decision.

Ling Xiao belonged to the marshal's camp. There were many in the military who did not submit to the marshal — among the nine great generals, four belonged to other factions, while two maintained their neutrality. If these factions had not been at each

other's throats fighting for power constantly, not at all cooperative with one another, the marshal would not have been secure in his First Marshal's seat for over 10 years.

But even so, at any sign of trouble, the opponent would look for an excuse to attack the marshal, so the marshal could not guarantee that his position would continue to remain secure. Ling Xiao had no choice but consider this as well. It should be known that the marshal had invested a lot in gaining special admission into the First Men's Military Academy for Ling Lan.

If Ling Lan refused this admission in the end, the opponent factions would certainly not let this opportunity go by. They would set their targets on Ling Lan and monitor her from the shadows to find out the true reason for her refusal... Even if they found nothing, they were also likely to manufacture something that would cause the marshal, who had approved and fought for her admission, to lose face...

This would definitely cause the marshal's camp to descend into a passive and disadvantaged position. As part of the marshal's camp, Ling Xiao naturally did not want to see this happen, but most importantly, he was afraid that with his lone pair of fists, he would not be able to keep Ling Lan safe from danger.

Even if Lan Luofeng heard nothing else, she got the point that Ling Lan would be in danger if this resulted in long-term surveillance. Lan Luofeng was an intelligent woman — she quickly figured out which option would be more beneficial to Ling Lan. Ling Xiao's decision was not wrong.

Still, although she understood, the rage in her chest was still simmering. It was this Ling Xiao before her with his presumptuousness that had forced her precious daughter to have no choice but to delay regaining her true identity by 6 years... no matter how she looked at Ling Xiao right now, she just felt irritated!

"Ling Xiao, do you still remember those promises you made when you proposed?" After calming down, Lan Luofeng was rather scary.

Cold sweat welled up on Ling Xiao's forehead, but he did not dare not to answer, "I remember."

"Back then, what was the 4th promise you made to me?" asked Lan Luofeng icily. Right then, she seemed to have the air of a soldier about her.

"After marriage, I will make sure my wife is forever happy and well. I will never make

my wife angry. If I break this promise, punishment is up to my wife." Ling Xiao's memory was excellent; he could immediately recite his 4th promise.

"Ling Xiao, right now I am very unhappy, very unwell. I am very, very angry. What do you think I should do?" bit out Lan Luofeng, word by word.

"I know, Luofeng. Tell me then, I will take any punishment." Ling Xiao grimaced. He had no excuse — it was true that he had not upheld the promise he had made back then. Not only did he leave for the battlefield when they had just been newly wed, causing Lan Luofeng much distress, he had even gone missing for 17 years after that, leaving Lan Luofeng to hold up this family all on her own. And now, when he returned, he had immediately created another mess, causing Lan Luofeng to boil over in rage... he indeed deserved punishment.

"I have decided. Before Ling Lan regains her female identity, I will not allow you to step one foot into my room..." With that said, Lan Luofeng turned away without a backwards glance at Ling Xiao, opening the bedroom door and walking out.

Ling Xiao was left gaping blankly, before he came to himself and ran after her, shouting, "Luofeng, don't treat me this way, let's discuss things properly..." He gave chase, pleading with Lan Luofeng to take back those terrible words.

Lan Luofeng's punishment was just too cruel — wasn't this forcing him to become a monk for 6 years? Although he had already abstained and been one for 17 years, at that time he was being a vegetarian without meat in sight¹, so of course he could bear it. But things were different now. His favourite dish was tempting him every day in front of his eyes, but he was not allowed to eat it? This was definitely a type of flagellation and abuse from the soul...

Ling Lan saw Lan Luofeng charging back huffily, ignoring Ling Xiao chasing behind her, and just knew that the situation was probably not good.

Meanwhile, the moment Ling Xiao arrived at the dining hall, his initially frantic emotions silently faded away, to be replaced with a calm gentleness. However, Ling Lan could still clearly sense that trace of awkwardness remaining in his heart... looks like, against Lan Luofeng in a towering rage, Ling Xiao was equally as helpless.

Lan Luofeng's displeasure was really too obvious. He Xuyang did not dare to linger; he swiftly finished off his breakfast and then found a random excuse to leave the dining

hall. Ling Lan's gaze signalled for Ling Qin to follow him and send him off, but it was actually to ensure there was no one else in the surroundings because what's next would be a discussion for their family alone. It was really very important that no one else learned anything of it.

Even though Ling Xiao was calmly eating his breakfast, he was still observing the expressions of everyone in the dining hall. Seeing Ling Lan's caution in handling things, a surge of pride rose in his heart: *Look, this is my daughter!*

Compared to a son, Ling Xiao was even worse at resisting a daughter...

"Is the decision for me to enter the First Men's Military Academy set in stone?" After receiving Ling Qin's confirmation that the coast was clear, Ling Lan stared at Ling Xiao steadily as she asked.

"Well, no, but the risk of refusing is too great, both for you and for me." Ling Xiao did not prevaricate. He then detailed all the possible consequences of refusing to Ling Lan, and concluded, "The final decision is still up to you. If you really don't want to go, I, Ling Xiao, can still take the fallout. However, the danger to you will be a little greater."

Chapter 199

Fellow Disciples?

At this moment, Lan Luofeng could not hold back from saying, "Ling Lan, don't worry too much. Your father can handle things." Although Lan Luofeng was extremely annoyed with Ling Xiao, her trust in Ling Xiao was still unshaken.

Ling Lan thought for a moment, and then asked, "Can you make sure my gender won't be discovered?" Since Ling Xiao had decided to send her into the military academy, he must have a sure plan.

"Yes, I will arrange everything." Ling Xiao's eyes were filled with confidence; he would never take any chances with his daughter's life.

"Then I'll go," Ling Lan decided. Honestly, the greatest reason why she had not wanted to go study at the military academy was that she feared her true gender being discovered; there were just too many events involving body check-ups over the first year. She had the confidence to hide once or twice, but with such a large number of occasions, she was uncertain she could keep the charade going. Since Ling Xiao could help her eliminate this problem, Ling Lan naturally had nothing else to worry about.

Besides, Ling Lan really wanted to see Qi Long, Han Jijyun, Luo Lang, and the others again. When they found out that she would be studying with them at the First Men's Military Academy, their expressions would probably be supremely interesting.

A faint smile bloomed on the corners of Ling Lan's lips. Honestly speaking, she had really been reluctant to part with them. She had spent so many years with the group after all... the ties and emotions among them had already burrowed into their respective bones — they were not something she could so easily cut away.

Ling Lan's decision brought a temporary end to the fight between Ling Xiao and Lan Luofeng. The family of three could finally put their attention on their breakfast. However, as the first meal together as a reunited family, the atmosphere was a little strange. It should have been heart-warming, but due to the remnant outrage in Lan Luofeng's heart, along with Ling Lan's subtle discomfort towards Ling Xiao, the overall atmosphere was rather awkward.

Although Ling Xiao tried his best to please Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan, the latter two were in no mood to accommodate him. This caused Ling Xiao to suffer through a rather awkward breakfast, dejection colouring his brow subconsciously.

Seeing this familiar expression, Ling Lan's hand, which was holding her chopsticks, trembled. Right then, Ling Xiao's expression was almost exactly like the expression of the Ling Xiao in the legacy space when she had refused to call him 'daddy'. This made Ling Lan's heart pound, that initial sense of unfamiliarity with this Ling Xiao abruptly melting away. At this moment, she finally felt that the gentle Ling Xiao before her now who loved to smile, was truly the same Ling Xiao that she had willingly called 'daddy' previously... the current Ling Xiao just did not know this yet.

Ling Lan opened her mouth, but still did not manage to utter 'daddy'. The spiritual entity Ling Xiao was the Ling Xiao of 17 years ago, while the Ling Xiao now was the Ling Xiao of 17 years later¹. Whether in terms of appearance or physical aura, the two were somewhat different. This brief period of time spent together was not enough for Ling Lan to get over these differences. Besides, Ling Lan had always been a girl who did not open her heart readily to others.

"In that unknown world, were there also many strange and wonderful things?" Even though she wasn't able to call Ling Xiao 'daddy' just yet, Ling Lan still could not bear to see Ling Xiao being so awkward. So, she decided to help him out by initiating a conversation.

Ling Lan's question caused Ling Xiao's eyes to light up. His initially somewhat dejected expression instantly became energetic and lively, and he said excitedly, "Yes! Although the technology there was outdated, they had very rich mineral resources. Many of the materials there are those which the Federation lacks. But, please don't spread this information, I did not tell anyone else about this..."

Seeing Ling Xiao animatedly telling Ling Lan all about the unknown world he had been at, a smile gradually emerged on Lan Luofeng's face. Ling Xiao and Ling Lan were the two people she loved the most; of course she wanted the two of them to get along. At this moment, Lan Luofeng had completely forgotten to hold onto her grudge against Ling Xiao.

Right then, Ling Lan was actually somewhat regretting her choice of topic. She had not pegged Ling Xiao as a chatterbox, but once he started speaking he could not be stopped... this made a green vein pop out on her forehead, and she almost flipped the

dining table to signal an end to the topic.

Ling Lan did not know that, if it wasn't for her question, Ling Xiao would not have been so excited about the topic and spilled everything about the unknown world in a rush to her. Clearly, Ling Lan's curious tone had thrilled Ling Xiao beyond reason, causing him to lose his composure. He just wanted to make his daughter happy — any *Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* dad would involuntarily become foolish, long-winded, and unprincipled in front of his daughter.

As if taking pity on Ling Lan's poor ears, the heavens sent someone to rescue her. A cold harrumph rang out in the dining hall, "If you've returned, why have you not scrambled over to see me?"

Ling Xiao was in the middle of his excited narration when he was shocked by this sudden voice. He leapt up quickly and choked out, "Master! Why are you here?"

"Darn brat, can't I be here?" Although Mu Shui-qing was scolding Ling Xiao, his tone was emotional. It was clear to see how much Ling Xiao's return had impacted the old man. If not because he wanted to give Ling Xiao some personal time with his family, Mu Shui-qing would definitely have come seek Ling Xiao out as soon as he heard the news.

Only then did Ling Xiao remember that it was Mu Shui-qing's appearance 3 years ago which had saved Ling Lan's life. His master must have been worried that Ling Lan would suffer another assassination attempt, and so had remained at the Ling family mansion to protect her.

Ling Xiao was instantly overcome with remorse. Because of him, his wandering master had no choice but to stop his travels to stay at the Ling family mansion to protect Ling Lan. In the end, it was still his failing...

"Ling Lan, bring Ling Xiao over to see me." Mu Shui-qing did not bother himself with Ling Xiao's thoughts. He gave an order directly to Ling Lan, and then went utterly silent.

"Yes, Master!" replied Ling Lan calmly. Her voice was not very loud — you could perhaps even call it very soft — so Ling Xiao, lost in his guilty feelings, did not notice what she said.

Ling Lan's cold face could not help but twitch as she glanced at the pensive Ling Xiao.

She had forgotten that she had another identity — as a disciple of Mu Shui-qing as well, Ling Xiao would be her senior brother...

They were father and daughter, but also fellow disciples of the same sect... the seniority and relationship hierarchy between them was really such a mess!

Conflicted, Ling Lan put down her bowl and chopsticks. Standing up, she waved goodbye to Lan Luofeng, and then departed swiftly from the dining hall. Alright, right now, she too was utterly confounded by the complicated tangle of her relationship with her father.

Ling Lan's greeting startled Ling Xiao out of his reverie, and without her having to call him, Ling Xiao too said goodbye to Lan Luofeng and followed Ling Lan out of the house to arrive at a back courtyard —— the site of Mu Shui-qing's seclusion.

The moment they entered the yard, they saw Mu Shui-qing sitting up straight on a wooden chair in the garden. Ling Xiao saw that Mu Shui-qing's hair was all white now. Though he continued to smile, his eyes abruptly turned red as he cried out softly, "Master!"

Mu Shui-qing peered intently at Ling Xiao, cataloguing the condition of his body, before nodding in satisfaction. "Not bad, no signs of any latent problems." Apparently, Mu Shui-qing's first priority was to scan Ling Xiao's body for any problems. After all, back then, Ling Xiao had been blasted by a tremendous force to an unknown world — though he managed to survive, he must have received some heavy damage back then.

Mu Shui-qing had been extremely afraid that Ling Xiao had paid the price of depleting his vital energies to earn the chance of survival. But now, from the looks of it, the situation was not as horrible as he had imagined. This reassured him greatly.

"Thank you, Master!" said Ling Xiao gratefully. He naturally knew what Mu Shui-qing had done.

"Other than to check you over properly, there is one more thing I want you to do," said Mu Shui-qing.

"Please instruct me, Master," said Ling Xiao respectfully, slightly toning down his smile.

"Help your master assess Lan-er ²," said Mu Shui-qing, pointing to Ling Lan, who was standing behind Ling Xiao.

"Ah? Master..." Ling Xiao's small smile froze. He would never have expected that this was what Mu Shui-qing had wanted him to do. Ling Lan was only 16 years old — could she withstand the force of presence of a god-class operator?

"I forgot to tell you. Three years ago, I've already taken on Ling Lan as my true disciple. In fact, she is already your junior sister." After spending three years together, Mu Shui-qing naturally knew Ling Lan's true gender by now.

That said, Mu Shui-qing began to laugh heartily. Ling Lan could just feel the trace of mischief running through Mu Shui-qing's laughter — he really gave off the impression of an old prankster right then.

Hearing this, Ling Xiao's expression changed drastically. He almost spewed blood, and could no longer hold onto that unchanging smile on his face. Flustered, he said, "Master, Ling Lan is my daughter!" *Couldn't you have taken on Ling Lan as my disciple on my behalf instead?!*

Mu Shui-qing glared at him. "Before me, the only thing that matters is the relationship within the sect. At other times, it's up to you what you want to call each other."

Mu Shui-qing's determination caused Ling Xiao to rub at his forehead, head aching. At this moment, he no longer had any bit of his usual genial air, his entire aura rather prickly. *Godd*mmit, what the hell was this?!* He had not even gained his daughter's acknowledgement — and now his seniority was undercut by a whole generation, making him his own daughter's senior brother? No wonder the common folk all called his master an old beast — sure enough, he did not act on logic, but on personal whim.

Ling Xiao began to resent his master's offbeat manner of doing things.

"Master, father and I do not suit this type of address. Let us just address each other as normal." Ling Lan was just as conflicted, suddenly finding that calling Ling Xiao 'senior brother' was even harder than calling him 'daddy'...Previously, since Ling Xiao was dead, Ling Lan had not thought this would be an issue.

Hearing Ling Lan verbally acknowledge him as her father, Ling Xiao felt a frisson of joy course through his heart. But he was immediately depressed again. This meant that Ling Lan only acknowledged their blood relation; it did not mean that Ling Lan had accepted him emotionally, otherwise Ling Lan would have just called him 'daddy' rather than 'father'. Ling Xiao was very clear on the difference between the two forms

of address.

However, Ling Xiao immediately bucked up again. Since Ling Lan had already acknowledged the truth of their blood relation, he believed that it would not be long before she would be able to accept him wholeheartedly as her dad.

Ling Xiao's heart was filled with motivation — to obtain the acknowledgement of the two most important women in his life, he would definitely work hard. He would use all his love to fill up the gaps left by his absence of 17 years.

Seeing the conflicted and rebellious looks on the faces of his two disciples, Mu Shui-qing could only regretfully set aside his pranking nature. Still, Ling Xiao's reaction had pleased him well — he had finally managed to rip that unchanging smile off of Ling Xiao's face! So it wasn't that Ling Xiao was inherently even-tempered... it was just that there had been nothing important enough in the past to warrant a change in his expression!

"Oh alright, suit yourselves." Mu Shui-qing finally let Ling Xiao and Ling Lan off the hook. This made both Ling Xiao and Ling Lan sigh internally — if Mu Shui-qing had truly insisted, they could only have obeyed their master's command against their will, and first address each other as fellow disciples. Of course, this would undoubtedly be rubbing salt into the wounds on Ling Xiao's heart. After all, right now, he still had not managed to have Ling Lan willingly acknowledge him as her dad yet.

Chapter 200

Ling Xiao vs Ling Lan!

"However, Ling Xiao, don't hold back. Ling Lan is not as weak as you think she is. She has already obtained your legacy," reminded Mu Shui-qing.

A strange light entered Ling Xiao's eyes. Ever since he had found out that his legacy had suddenly disappeared from the Central Scout Academy, he had already had the premonition that Ling Lan had obtained the legacy. However, so much had happened since he returned that he had not had a chance to ask Ling Lan about it. Now though, Mu Shui-qing's words proved his premonition right. This put him in a very good mood. His legacy had been meant for Ling Lan to begin with — he had only been worried that the military would confiscate it and refuse to hand it over to Ling Lan.

In reality, his worries were not unfounded. The military had indeed refused to hand over the legacy directly to Ling Lan, placing it instead in the virtual world of the Central Scout Academy for all the scout students to attempt when they found they could not crack it. They had still been plotting to keep Ling Xiao's method of ascension within their control.

Although Ling Xiao did not know how Ling Lan had managed to fool those monitoring staff to successfully obtain his legacy from right under the military's nose, this was the situation that Ling Xiao had most wanted to see. He could not help but give his daughter countless thumbs ups inside his heart!

"Alright, Lan-er, just let... me properly assess how much you've learned?" Ling Xiao swallowed the word 'daddy' he had been about to say, forcibly changing it into 'me'.

Ling Xiao was still very careful — before Ling Lan accepted him, Ling Xiao did not want to put pressure on her and make her unhappy.

Ling Lan did not respond, merely giving a cold martial salute, and getting into a defensive stance as she instantly activated a spiritual shield.

To determine whether one has studied well in the Divine Command Sect, of course one would have to examine one's prowess in spiritual confrontation. The sect's unique

combat style was very familiar to Ling Xiao and Ling Lan who were both from the Divine Command Sect.

However, when Ling Xiao activated his spiritual pressure, Ling Lan finally understood what kind of existence a god-class operator was. Ling Xiao's spiritual power was as vast as an ocean, but thick and substantial — just activating it made Ling Lan feel like she was a tiny boat on a raging sea, struggling desperately to stay afloat. If she were at all careless, she would be consumed entirely.

Just this little taste let Ling Lan know that Ling Xiao's spiritual power was more formidable than Mu Shui-qing's, even drawing an unfathomable fear from within her.

Ling Lan's expression turned grim. Of course, on the outside, Ling Lan only seemed to grow even colder — the temperature of the entire space plummeted, bringing a faint chill into the air.

"Your spiritual self mutation is actually along the line of the element of ice!" Ling Xiao sensed the drop in temperature, and his brows furrowed. This type of mutation path was actually not very suitable for piloting mecha. Or more precisely, this spiritual mutation could not add anything to a mecha operator's control skill. That way, it would be very difficult to achieve the merging of human and mecha as one... For Ling Lan, this meant that she might not be able to touch the gates of becoming an imperial operator in the future. In other words, there was almost no hope for Ling Lan to ascend to become an imperial operator.

Ling Lan knew that the spiritual mutation Ling Xiao was referring to was her awakened innate talent. She replied calmly, "The direction of mutation is not important, and whether or not it is suitable for operating mecha is also not important. Otherwise, there wouldn't be so few imperial operators in the Federation. I believe that ascension to the highest level still depends on serendipity and whether I am putting in enough effort!"

"Lan-er, talent is very important for operating mecha, but the suitability of one's spiritual mutation to mecha is even more important. One cannot lack either one," said Ling Xiao with a sigh. He had seen countless mecha operators who had had the same belief as Ling Lan at the start, thinking that there was hope as long as they worked hard. But in truth, every operator of imperial level and beyond possessed a spiritual mutation which enhanced their mecha operation with its associated abilities. In other words, there had not been a single imperial operator whose spiritual mutation was

unsuitable for operating mecha thus far.

"Just because no one has found the way, does not mean that the way does not exist." Ling Lan had full confidence in herself. Instructor Number One had said before that her other awakened innate talent, the top-rated Profound Insight, was the talent best suited for operating mecha. Although she did not know whether her dual awakening would bring some unforeseen challenges to her mecha control, she believed that as long as she worked hard enough, she would not lose to the various prodigies of this world with their exceptional talents.

Of course, the inherent weakness of her body was also something that would hold Ling Lan back from ascending to a higher level; the physical weakness of women could not be so easily compensated for. However, for 16 years, Ling Lan had been training hard with the full set of foundational physical skills of the learning space, along with the Qi exercises of her past life. This had caused all aspects of her physical capacity to become infinitely close to that of the boys of the same age. As long as she continued her training, this inherent disadvantage would slowly be resolved, and would no longer be a factor holding her back from ascending.

"Good, ambitious!" Ling Lan's confidence and conviction swept away Ling Xiao's dejection. He was heartened, and his spirits rallied.

This minor recovery allowed his spiritual power to gather once more. If Ling Lan had not already entered combat mode and kept her guard up impeccably, she might have been overwhelmed by this sudden fluctuation and received damage to her spiritual self.

But even so, Ling Lan still felt a large force slamming into her brain, and was knocked briefly unconscious! This also allowed Ling Lan to experience how her opponents had felt back when she had used her spiritual attacks on them.

"Heptashield!" chanted Ling Lan mentally. Her fingers twitched, and her spiritual power suddenly shifted rapidly — three approximately 1 square unit ¹ spiritual shields appeared instantly.

The heptashield, as its name implied, was a top-level Divine Command Sect technique involving the formation of seven shields. It swiftly divided the spiritual power of an operator into seven parts, each part forming a shield in the formation. The defensive ability it created was definitely not limited to the total of the defence values of the

seven shields added together — rather, it used the flexible movement of the shields to provide a comprehensive defence with no dead angles. If practised till the end stage, the shield formation could even be used for offence. Of course, Ling Lan currently wasn't at that level yet — out of the seven shields, she could only control three.

Seeing this, Ling Xiao's smile deepened. "Not bad. I can't believe you've already learned one top-level technique!" The very first top-level technique Ling Xiao had learned in the past had also been the heptashield. However, back then, he had already been 18 years old, while Ling Lan was currently only 16 right now, so she had learned this technique a whole 2 years earlier. This just proved that, with regards to spiritual power, his daughter's talent was definitely at the most aberrant level...

At this time, Ling Xiao did not know that Ling Lan possessed such tremendous spiritual power because this was the accumulation of the spiritual power of both her lives, nothing to do with innate talent. However, all of this was not important, because Ling Lan's current spiritual power was indeed already much, much more than any of her peers.

"Let me test the defensive ability of your heptashield." With this warning, Ling Xiao charged forwards with a powerful surge of energy. Ling Lan knew that this was the most basic of spiritual power attacks — as long as one has had any spiritual training, the spiritual charge was an attack they would know!

However, a god-class operator's spiritual charge was unlike a regular person's spiritual charge — although Ling Lan could sense that the opponent was only hurling one cord of spiritual charge at her, she could still sense the great threat posed by the attack coming right at her.

Ling Lan's brows furrowed and the fingers of her right hand flicked lightly. The three shields defending her body immediately shifted into the way of Ling Xiao's attack trajectory. Ling Lan believed in her sense of danger ² — this should be a hint given to her by Profound Insight. Ling Xiao's attack may seem normal, but there was probably some trick hidden within it.

Ling Xiao's spiritual charge struck the first shield. Without putting up much resistance, the shield shattered. Seeing this, Ling Lan's expression remained unmoved, merely directing the second shield forwards. The second shield was swiftly shattered as well, but it managed to sustain itself for 2 to 3 seconds before shattering, unlike the first which had shattered upon contact.

Without any hesitation, Ling Lan brought her third shield forward to meet Ling Xiao's spiritual charge. But just as the shield was about to encounter the spiritual charge, the spiritual shield suddenly contracted, becoming a small mirror shield the size of one's palm between blinks.

Ling Xiao's spiritual charge crashed soundlessly into that tiny mirror shield of Ling Lan's. If not for the pebbles and twigs and leaves on the ground being thrown in the air to fly away from the point where Ling Lan and Ling Xiao met, no one would know that the two people facing each other were currently locked in a most dangerous spiritual clash.

The observing Mu Shui-qing tilted his head slightly, dodging a random rock that had flown in his direction. The smile on his face was growing increasingly wider, like a wildly blooming garden cosmos³, as radiant as it could be.

Mu Shui-qing was naturally very satisfied. His whole life, he had only taken in two disciples. It went without saying that Ling Xiao was his most accomplished disciple, now among the strongest in the Federation — a god-class operator, who were called ultimate weapons in this world. And then there was Ling Lan... Mu Shui-qing felt that their Divine Command Sect surely existed for the sake of an aberrant prodigy like her. Mu Shui-qing believed that the Divine Command Sect would definitely flourish in her hands.

At this moment, Mu Shui-qing could not help but look at Ling Xiao, thinking: *Ling Xiao, oh Ling Xiao, you should take a look at the heptashield belonging to Ling Lan!*

The moment Ling Xiao's spiritual charge met Ling Lan's small mirror shield, he felt his own spiritual charge being repelled back at him by a massive force!

This spiritual power that had been reflected back at him escaped his control in an instant, actually becoming part of the other's attack force targeting him!

"Heptashield!" Ling Xiao's eyebrows lifted in surprise. His fingers flicked and seven shields appeared around him. With a thought, one of the shields flew forward instantly to block this reflected spiritual power.

"This heptashield is different from mine..." Who was Ling Xiao? He had noticed that Ling Lan's heptashield was different at a glance — his seven shields could only block, but could not reflect attacks.

"Is it because of the contraction?" Ling Xiao flicked a finger, and one of the shields swiftly shrunk down to become palm-sized as well. However, the shield only became much thicker, without any sign of that mirror surface like Ling Lan's had. "Looks like this is not the only reason!"

Although Ling Lan had managed to reflect Ling Xiao's spiritual charge, she did not manage to stand steady. She was forced 5 to 6 steps back before all the force behind Ling Xiao's spiritual charge dissipated. Still, even so, she felt a nauseous roiling in her chest. Ling Xiao's power had been too formidable; she had only withstood the hit with great difficulty.



PtF by: traitorATZEN